

ALL SAINTS WESTON

SANCTUARY SERVICE

18 AUGUST 2024

ACTS 6: 5 – 7:1

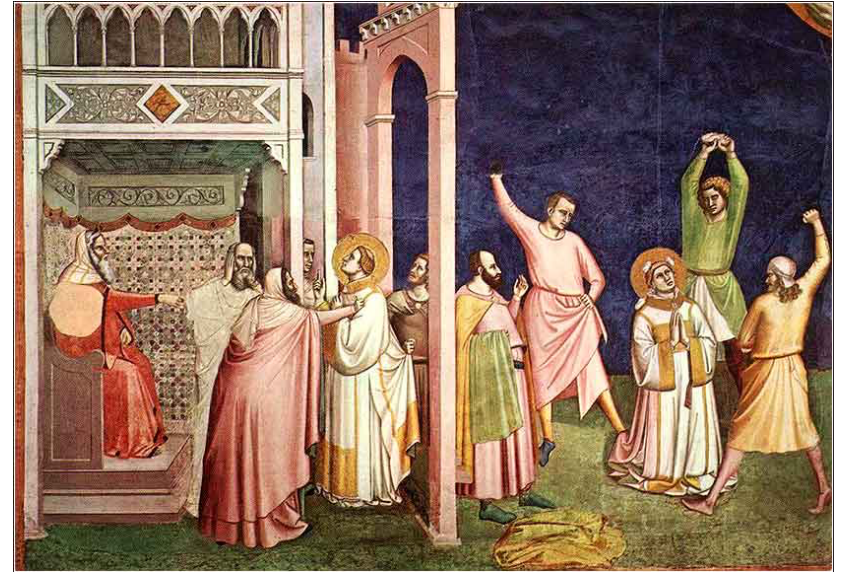
ACTS 7: 44 – ACTS 8:4

PAYING THE ULTIMATE PRICE

We have already mentioned this morning the death of a saint – the Bishop and hymnwriter, Timothy Dudley Smith. Yesterday in the small hours of the morning, Eric Cooper fell asleep in the Lord or in the words of the Salvation Army '*was promoted to glory*'. After a series of falls over the past few weeks, he was taken to the RUH where it was discovered he was terminally ill with cancer. He was 95 and ready to go. As dying goes, it was a relatively easy death.

That was not the case for the subject of today's Acts' episode . Stephen was a man probably in the prime of life, active in the Lord's work, full of the Holy Spirit and of power. Just as he was beginning to exercise this really powerful ministry, he was snatched away, subject to a farce of a trial and then seized by a mob who gave him summary execution through the Jewish practice of stoning to death. He had neither broken the secular laws nor the teaching of the Jewish scriptures but he followed in his Saviour's footsteps even echoing some of Jesus last words when he prayed forgiveness over his executioners and those

who approved of the execution – one of whom was Saul later to be known as Paul the Apostle.



This is a lovely medieval depiction of the scene of his trial and the scene of his execution. Notice how Saul takes almost centre stage as he holds the clothes of those who are doing the stoning so that they can throw with even greater force. Later in Acts Paul in one of his testimonies himself says:

When the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.'

Last week I referred to the roller-coaster ride which is Acts. Well this illegal execution and the persecution that followed it is a very different story to the grumbling about the fairness of

the distribution in the Food Bank. It is a sober reminder that for many of those early Christians and for countless others down through 20 centuries, a very high price has had to be paid for the crime of following Jesus and remaining true to him.

In this age of comfortable and consumerist Christianity, when even for those who are committed Christians, going to and belonging to church or not going and belonging to church is often in competition with doing something more interesting, we do well to remember that this church like all churches only exists today because men and women and sometimes children have been willing to pay a heavy price, sometimes the ultimate price of following Jesus. They have known in a way that I think most of us have not known, what it means to pick up a cross or to lose our lives for His sake. Stephen was one such man – in fact the first Christian martyr. The first of many and the price is still being paid across the world – in Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, India, Nigeria, China.

I think it has often been said that there were more Christian martyrs in the twentieth century than in the whole of the nineteen centuries that preceded it. So , having heard again the well-known story of Stephen, want to tell the stories of some twentieth century martyrs, some of whom are much, much less well-known. I hope we will be moved, challenged and inspired by their stories.

I am using as my point of connection, this building. Do you know what it is?

Yes - Westminster Abbey.

And does anybody know what is just above the great West Doorway which you can just about make out in this picture?



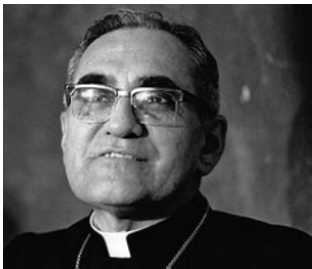
No? Well they are sculptures unveiled in 1998 to fill ten niches which had been unfilled since the Tower was built more than 500 previously.

The sculptures are ten modern martyrs – men and women killed in the twentieth because of their Christian faith.

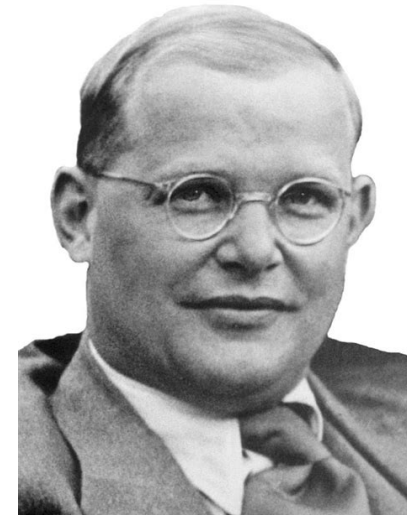
I am going to briefly mention 6 of them, most of whom I think you will have heard of. But the other four you will almost certainly not have heard of and I will tell their stories in a little more detail.



You will all recognise this man. It is...? Yes Martin Luther king. The Civil Rights Leader who is famous for his I have a dream speech in front of the Capital in Washington. In 1968 not long after that speech, he was gunned down in Memphis Tennessee.



How about this man? Oscar Romero. He was a Roman Catholic priest, then bishop and then Archbishop in San Salvador at a time when the revolutionary government was carrying out horrendous human rights abuses.

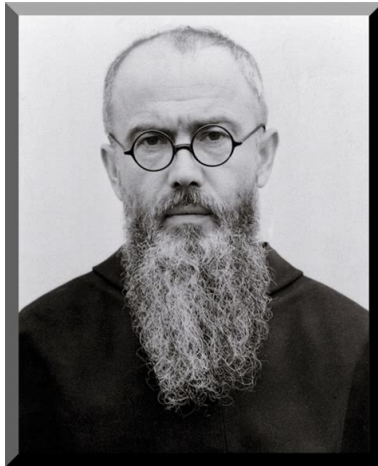


This man is often mentioned in sermons. Who is it? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor and theologian who opposed the Nazi regime, voluntarily returned to Germany from the USA and was eventually imprisoned and hanged by piano wire a few days before the end of World War II.



Now someone from Africa. Anyone?? Archbishop Janani Luwum. He was a vocal opponent of the sadistic rule of Uganda

Idi Amin. In 1973, Luwum along with two former Cabinet ministers were arrested for treason. They were beaten and their bodies riddled with bullets. Later State Radio announced they had been killed in a car crash.



This one? Maximilian Kolbe. The Polish Priest imprisoned in a concentration camp by the Nazis. In July 1941 the camp authorities decided to randomly execute 10 men because a prisoner had escaped. Kolbe volunteered to take the place of one man who had a family. That man survived but Kolbe after two weeks of being starved was then killed by being injected with carbolic acid. The Catholic Church has made him a saint.



I doubt if you will get this one. It's Grand Duchess Elizabeth: She was married into the Russian Royal family at the end of the nineteenth century. Her Husband, Grand Duke Sergei was assassinated in 1905 and following that event, she gave away all her wealth and became a nun setting up an orphanage and devoted her life to the service of the poor and the outcast. After the 1917 Russian Revolution, she was arrested and summarily executed in a mineshaft.

Most of those names were well-known names and some had prominent positions as church leaders before their deaths. The last four sculptures on the Westminster Abbey are not household names. I suspect the Committee that sifted through

the hundreds or maybe thousands of people they could have had commemorated deliberately wanted four 'ordinary Christians – except of course they weren't ordinary. The ones they chose were aged 15 to 66. There is one man one woman, a girl of 15 and a boy of 20 or 21. They come from China, South Africa, Papua New Guinea and South Africa – that in itself tells you something about the spread and reach of the good news of Jesus Christ.



The first one we meet is Lucien Tapiedi who was born in 1921 or 1922 in Papua New Guinea. His father was a sorcerer, who died when his sons were still young. He went to a mission school and then, in 1939, he entered a teacher training college named after the British Celtic saint St Aidan. Here Lucien became known as a diligent and cheerful student, fond of physical recreation but also musical. In 1941 aged 20 or 21 he became a teacher and evangelist.

But it was not to last. Barely a year later, in July 1942 the Japanese invaded Papua New Guinea. Many of the foreign missionaries had remained even though they could have got to safety before the invasion. Many were to perish.

In Northern Papua, a group of missionaries tried to evade capture. And went into hiding in to the dense forests. Among them was Lucien, who was determined not to abandon the missionaries with whom he worked. One day they came to a village inhabited by the Orokaiva people, presumably hoping for shelter but in fact they were made prisoner. One of the Orokaiva, a man named Hivijapa, killed Tapiedi near a stream by Kurumbo village. The remainder of the group perished soon after; six of them beheaded by the Japanese on Buna beach.

As is so often the case surprising things happen after a terrible act like this. Lucien's killer, Hivijapa became a Christian after the war and he took the name Hivijapa Lucien. Later he built a church dedicated to the memory of his victim Lucien Tapiedi.



Let's move now to South Africa and hear the story of Manche Masemola. She was born around 1913, in a village near Johannesburg in South Africa. Manche grew up with her parents, two older brothers, a younger sister, and an orphaned cousin, Lucia. She did not go to school but worked with her family on the land and at home.

As a young child she started attending the local Anglican mission church and not long after expressed a desire to be baptised.

When Manche's parents realized that Manche and her cousin Lucia were being formally prepared for baptism, they sent both girls to a distant location to work as cooks for cattle-herders. Since the girls persisted in their faith, the parents divided them by sending Lucia back home. Then they had to take Manche back. That's when they began to beat and humiliate Manche

into submission. However this had no effect on Manche and she persisted in wanting to be baptised.

The more she insisted on being baptised, the more her parents punished her. She was due to be baptised on Easter Sunday 1928, but she had a feeling that it would not happen. She told her cousin "I shall be baptized with my own blood." Her prediction came true, as she was killed just one or two months before Easter. She was about 15 years old.

Most reports state that she was killed by her parents' beatings or at least with her parents' knowledge. Another version states that she had died from the potion. In any case, it seems clear that her parents were instrumental in her death.

Manche's mother continued to oppose Christianity but in 1969, more than 40 years after her daughter's death, she finally turned to Christ and was baptized, adopting the new name Magdalene.

Nowadays every August, many pilgrims still visit the place of Manche's burial.

When asked if she was afraid to die, Manche said, "Never." She was determined to resist until the end, regardless of the consequences. She had been instructed in the Christian faith for approximately a year. She had never learned to read or write, but had learned enough to know what she believed and where she was going.

Now back to Asia and to Pakistan.



Esther John or Qamar Zia as she was first known was born in 1929 in the India that existed before it was partitioned into India and Pakistan. She was one of seven children. As a child she attended a government school and, after the age of seventeen, a Christian school. There she was profoundly moved by the vibrant faith of one of her teachers, and she began to read the Bible earnestly. It was when reading the 53rd chapter of Isaiah that she was suddenly overtaken by a vivid conviction that Christ had died for her.

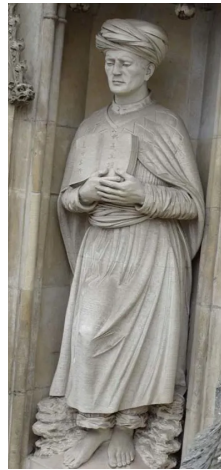
When India was partitioned, Qamar Zia moved with her family into the new state of Pakistan. Here she made contact with a missionary from Karachi who gave Qamar Zia a New Testament. Qamar's Christian faith had to grow privately, even secretly for fear of what her family would do to her if they knew. Then, seven years later, she ran away from home, fearful of the prospect of marriage to a Muslim husband. She found her way to that missionary in Karachi.

For a while Qamar Zia worked in an orphanage there, and it was at this time that she took the name Esther John. Her family

found her there and pressed her to return and to marry, but she refused. Later she left Karachi to work in a mission hospital in the Punjab. Subsequently, she trained as a teacher but also worked as an evangelist travelling from one village to another by bicycle, teaching women to read and working with them in the cotton fields. At times her relationship with her distant and perplexed family appeared calm; at others anxiety and tension brewed.

On 2nd February 1960 Esther John was brutally murdered in her own bedroom. She was 31. No one knows the extent to which her family were involved but the practice of honour killings when people apostasize is sadly a feature of some but not all cultures, as it was in the case of Manche Masemola. Later, a memorial chapel was built in front of the nurses' home in the grounds of the hospital where she had worked.

Finally to China. Some of you will remember the Cultural Revolution and Mao Zedong's Little Red Book. Young Red Guards, fanaticized by Mao, sought to break free of the past and to create a revolutionary society that was utterly new. As part of that new society, all religion must be destroyed. Churches were closed and Christians were forced to meet secretly.



At that time in one of the provinces there was a pastor who had come to faith through the China Inland Mission. His name was Wang Zhiming. Wang followed the guidance of the apostles Peter and Paul in being as good a citizen he could under the communist government but he refused to participate in denunciation meetings held to humiliate landlords or foment hatred against foreign powers. He was first arrested in 1954 and then held for two years in prison.

Then in 1969 at the height of the madness of the Cultural Revolution he put in prison again. There Wang endured extreme mental and physical tribulations. When confronted with the question, “Do you trust Mao Zedong or Jesus?” his unequivocal response was “I believe in Jesus.” Wang’s refusal to recant exposed him to horrific torture.

In late December 1973, just after St Stephen is commemorated in the church. Wang sensed that his day of martyrdom for the

Lord was imminent. Shackled in handcuffs and leg irons, he finally saw his son and wife, who had come to visit him – the only time they had been able to see him in the 4 years he was there.

Wang’s wife presented him with six boiled eggs. With his bleeding palms, Wang patted his wife’s shoulders and back from left to right and then from top to bottom, making the sign of the cross in blood. He kept three of the eggs and returned three to his wife. The eggs symbolized resurrection to eternal life, and the two sets of three symbolized the Trinity. The following day, after a public trial attended by tens of thousands of people at a middle school playground in Wuding County, he was paraded through the streets. His five crimes were inscribed into the death mark hat on the back of his neck, and the three Chinese characters for Wang Zhiming were crossed out in red signifying that the criminal deserved death. Wang faced his accusers with a smile on his face, showing not fear but joy. He was sentenced to death, taken away immediately after the trial and shot.

Today Wang is remembered reverently in the churches of Wuding, where there are around 30,000 Christians, and more than 100 places of worship.

The amazing thing about these deaths, about Stephen’s death and about the many other martyrs is that the efforts of the persecutors failed. From a relatively small number of Christians before the Communist Revolution there are now tens of millions. Lucien Tapiedi’s killer was converted as was Manche Masiola’s mother. The Church in Pakistan, despite great

pressures continues to survive as does the church in South Africa.

And one of the outcomes of Stephen's death was that the church was scattered and therefore the gospel was spread even further and faster than would have been the case without his death.

So what about us? Here in a safe country in a nice part of the world. I think I can safely assume, whatever trials and tribulations we may have had in our lives, that none of us have ever been thrown in prison or been at risk of death because we follow Jesus. There may have been some awkward moments, a little sacrifice here and there, a testing of the faith but nothing compared to what the ten martyrs plus Stephen were subject to. And of course, although there have been countless deaths of innocent people down through the ages, as indeed there are today, the point is none of these people need have died at the hands of the State, the family, soldiers or dictators. All they had to do was keep silent, renounce their faith and go along with injustice. None of us knows if we would have shown the same degree of courage and we shall probably never be faced with the choice and testing that they had.

So how can we respond? We can respond with gratitude for all the saints who down through the ages have kept the faith alive, often to the point of shedding of blood. We can remain grateful for the freedom we have to worship and gather together in homes and public buildings like our church. WE can pray for those who are being persecuted all over the world today. We can support those agencies like Open Doors and Barnabas who do so much to support the persecuted Church and indeed

those of other faiths who are persecuted and victimized. We can resolve with God's help to bear a good witness when our death approaches, albeit through natural causes. And in those wonderful words from Hebrews, we can say:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, many of whom have died for their faith, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.