

The Feast of St Simon and St Jude

28 October 2018

Gospel: John 15:17-27

A good sermon should begin with a funny story, shouldn't it?

But it is difficult today as we celebrate the Feast of Simon and Jude. Because what is funny about two disciples being killed? Martyrdom is not a joke.

At least you have to be Monty Python to give it a touch of humour. We all remember the film, *The Life of Brian*, and the black humour as the company were hanging on their crosses, singing: *"Always look at the bright side of life"*

As I do not possess their black humour, I have to introduce my sermon in another way. So let me tell you a real story from the real life:

One day Asia Bibi, a young Pakistani woman, went to the well to get water. But a quarrel was started. A group of Muslim women scolded her and refused to drink water from the well now, when Bibi, being a Christian, had just had a glass. She had polluted the water - they said - made the well unclean by drinking from it.

So the women demanded that Bibi should convert and become a Muslim to save herself. She refused

completely and answered them back: *“What has your prophet ever done to save human beings”?*

Not exactly a prudent comment.

A week later Bibi was beaten up by a group of people and got imprisoned. In court she was found guilty of blasphemy and sentenced to death.

Now, 9 years later, she is still in prison, waiting for the decision of Pakistan's High Court, whether or not she must be executed for a glass of water, just because she is from the Christian minority.

I wonder if she has found consolation in the words of Jesus today: *“If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.”*

Amnesty International and Christians groups have kept Bibi alive for 9 years; without their support she would have been killed a long time ago. Hopefully their protests and prayers will bear fruit, so the poor girl will be released after all those years.

But Bibi's story and that of many others illustrate the gospel reading today:

*“Servants are not greater than their master” - Jesus said - *“If they persecuted me, they will persecute you”.**

Living in Denmark or in UK, we easily forget that the Christian Church was persecuted from the very first beginning. As I have said before: All the 12 disciples were killed, except for John who probably died peacefully as an old man in Ephesus.

Most famous beside Stephen, the proto-martyr, were Peter and Paul, killed in Rome under the Emperor Nero who burnt Rome and blamed the Christians.

Today we celebrate the feast of Simon and Jude, 2 of the less known Twelve Disciples. They are said to have suffered martyrdom on the 28th of October, while they were preaching the gospel in Persia. We do not know much about them. From the New Testament we know that Simon was also called the Zealot to distinguish him from Simon Peter. And Jude was called Thaddaeus by Mark, not to mix him up with Judas Iscariot.

By the way, St Thaddaeus is considered to be the first to preach the gospel for the Armenians - the earliest Christian kingdom and a people who was almost annihilated by the Turks a 100 years ago. That genocide caused the death of 1.5 million Armenians.

In the 1930's Hollywood wanted to make a film about this horrifying killing of a whole Christian minority, but the Turkish ambassador in US prevented it. Two years ago Hollywood finally shot their movie called "*The Promise*", telling the story about the genocide which the Turks still deny until this day.

So when we commemorate St Jude or Thaddaeus today, let us also remember our Armenian fellow Christians.

To understand the persecution of the first centuries we have to understand the Roman idea of religion. You were free to worship any kind of gods, Greek-Roman or Egyptian, whatever. The only obligatory public worship was the worship of the emperor as a god; everybody had to participate. Many soldiers who became Christians began to refuse the offering to the statue of Caesar. But such a disorder could not be tolerated.

The last major persecution happened during the reign of Diocletian who became emperor in 284. In Egypt only around 150.000 were killed. Also our own St Alban became a martyr in Britain during the Diocletian persecution, which ended 311 AD.

In the NT the Greek word ***martys*** means a witness, nothing else. The Twelve and all the other disciples (also women) were *martys*, witnesses, because they had been with Jesus from the beginning. They had heard his sermons, seen his miraculous healings, and - most important - they had met him, resurrected from the dead, alive again.

They could not stop talking about him, even if it might cost them their lives. Think of Stephen who preached until the last stone silenced him.

Jesus had told them in advance, as we heard today: *“But they will do all these things to you on account of my name”*.

But what if it was not done on account of his name?

In 1935, T.S. Eliot wrote a drama for the Canterbury Festival about the famous old archbishop Thomas Becket. The drama was called: "*Murder in the Cathedral*", because 4 of the king's men assassinated the archbishop in front of the high altar in 1170. In Eliot's drama Thomas Becket is tempted 4 times, almost like Jesus in the desert. One of the temptations was the temptation to seek martyrdom. I don't know why this made an impression on me, when we read "*Murder in the Cathedral*" in High School. But later on, I have met that temptation several times through church history.

The question is, whether to expose yourself to martyrdom or to escape the danger and flee. Whether to gain the crown of martyrs, or to preserve your life in order to serve others and continue to spread the gospel.

Already St Paul realised that dilemma, and the church fathers taught us to escape the danger if possible, but without denying our Lord Jesus Christ. Only on account of his name the martyrdom had to be accepted, not for your own proud ambitions. But the temptation to let it happen or maybe even to provoke it, has been real enough for some.

Here we live in peace, thanks to God, but for many of our fellow Christians it is still the Martyr Age, the time for suffering with Christ.

I have mentioned Bibi; hopefully she will not become a martyr.

I could also mention the 2 Syrian bishops, Paul and Johannes, who disappeared 4 years ago, probably killed by ISIS.

We have to pray for all these persecuted fellow Christians. We have to remember them and help them as much as we can.

We are an Apostolic church - “built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone” - as Paul wrote to the Ephesians.

Christ and his church is one body, one unit, so if one member suffers we all suffer. Let us never forget them, the modern Simon and Jude, even if they are poor and living in countries far away. They are still our Christian sisters and brothers.

Together, let us put all our trust in Jesus, who preached on the mountain:

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you”.

Amen