

Sermon Preached at Christ Church St Laurence, Diocese of Sydney
New Guinea Martyrs Day 2 September 2023
Dr Murray Harvey, Bishop of Grafton



The Martyrs Mural, Dogura Cathedral PNG

As a young theological student visiting PNG in 1990, I visited the Sangara Mission near Popondetta Oro Province on the NE Coast of PNG. We were taken to visit what they said were the “graves of the old mothers”. These are the graves of Mavis Parkinson and May Hayman, two of the New Guinea Martyrs we commemorate today.

Like much of my visit to PNG that year, visiting these graves was a profoundly moving experience. I was surprised to learn later that these “old mothers” Mavis Parkinson and May Hayman, were only 24 and 30 years old respectively at the time of their death! Hardly old mothers in my view back then, but from our perspective, generations after their martyrdom, perhaps the term is quite appropriate. Errol Hodge, in his helpful book *The Seed of the Church: The Story of the Anglican Martyrs of Papua New Guinea* ¹ rightly points out that today’s Anglicans in PNG derive their faith from May and Mavis and the other martyrs, so referring to them as the old mothers expresses a deep gratitude for the roots of their faith.

This wasn’t my first encounter with the Martyrs of New Guinea. I grew up in Brisbane, soon after Philip Strong’s time as Archbishop. In 1981 he signed my copy of his *New Guinea Diaries*.² Many Brisbane Anglicans of my parent’s generation had known some of the martyrs personally. Not surprising. Margery Brenchley had attended Holy Trinity Fortitude Valley, just down the road, and had trained at the same hospital as my mother, albeit a couple of decades earlier. With his sister Mabel Renton who lived nearby, John Barge had regularly attended St Mark’s Bonney Avenue in Clayfield, where much later I was the Rector. His walking pole hangs on the wall of the church, and his sister Mabel remained a faithful member of the congregation until her death in about 2009. Mavis Parkinson, from Ipswich, was a teacher at a Society of the Sacred Advent School, St Michael’s, in Clayfield.



Above right. The Rev'd John Barge

While it might sound like I'm establishing my credentials to be preaching this sermon on Martyrs Day, what I'm really doing is to say that the Anglican Martyrs of New Guinea were just ordinary Anglicans like you and me. Whether they were from New Guinea, or from Australia or the United Kingdom, they were ordinary people, ordinary Christians, who lived out their lives in a day to day world that isn't that different from what we know today.

All could have chosen a safer way but believed that to do so would have been a denial of what they had been called to do. They stayed on in New Guinea in the face of a Japanese advance across the Pacific. They took the risks that they took because they had built up strong, trusting relationships with the people and communities they served. They stayed because of their commitment to the people. They offered themselves to God through their dedication to God's people in that place. What they were doing was making a difference in those communities. It would have been hard to leave.

In our Gospel reading today, John 12:20-33, Jesus offers an invitation to Christian service as the fullest possible community of love. Christian service here is relational, self-giving and joyful. It brings the servant into fullness of life with Christ and God. The seed of which Jesus speaks must fall into the earth and die (v.24), meaning it must be self-giving, a new creation, in order to fully grow and flourish. This is fullness of life that is present on both sides of death. *Whoever serves me must follow me, says Jesus. Where I am, there my servant will be also* (v.26). Wherever there is a need for new life, Jesus is there. At the heart of this relational, love-centred understanding is the trust between the Father and the Son (v.28 – the only instance of God's voice sounding in John's Gospel).³

In response to the Good News of this Gospel today, maybe we should ask ourselves some questions. Do you want to offer this new life of Jesus to others? In your ministry, in your

discipleship, are you present for others in a self-giving, joyful way so that they can grow to trust in Christ?

I'm no military historian but from my reading I know that the Japanese advance across the Pacific was rapid, and took many by surprise, including governments, armies and of course local people and churches. In the end New Guinea was overwhelmed by the aggressive presence of the Japanese forces in their country.

As we seek to witness to Christ today, we too are overwhelmed. Not by invading armies but by other things that challenge us as we seek to live faithfully today:

An aggressive and militant identity politic that puts national identity before a commitment to a shared humanity. Even some Christians participate in this, turning God into a sort of bigoted national deity.

We live in an *age of rage*. Populist politicians play on people's fears and resentments, normalising and fuelling hatred and rage

An intentional *othering* of minority or ethnic groups, and of different opinions, that plays on fear of difference, seeing difference as a threat to be opposed rather than an opportunity to be embraced

A vocal secularism where a faith perspective (not just a Christian faith perspective) is looked upon with suspicion and not accorded a place at the table

We are called to preach Christ against this kind of opposition. How, in this environment (which is inherently opposed to the way of Christ) can we be present for others in a self-giving, joyful way so that they can grow to trust in Christ and the new life he offers?

In a world torn apart by rivalry, anger and hatred, do we hear our vocational call to be living signs of a love and a presence that can bridge divisions and heal wounds? Research shows that newcomers to Australian churches are looking for belonging in community, and seeking out relationships of trust – will we serve them in this way as the Martyrs did?

One of the take aways for me from my visit to PNG all those years ago was the passionate faith and witness of PNG Christians. Truly a community that shows the loving, relational presence of Christ through self-giving service. I'm glad that ABM is able to partner with the church in PNG and support them in their work. What a vibrant church.

The Martyrs of New Guinea, Anglican and others, are good for us. They are so close in time and place that we are reminded that they're not stained glass window figures. They were real people who made a real difference in their time. May our faith and the choices we make enable us to make a real difference to the challenges of our day.

Today we join with the rest of the church as we remember these martyrs, many of whom were young adults. We give thanks for the inspiration they provide us today and pray that we may use the time that we have been given to faithfully serve the Lord.

*All powerful and ever living God,
Turn our weakness into strength.*

*As you gave the martyrs of Papua New Guinea
The courage to suffer death for Christ,
Give us the courage to live in faithful witness to you.
We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Notes.

1. Errol Hodge, *The Seed of the Church: The Story of the Anglican Martyrs of Papua New Guinea*. ABM Sydney, 1992.
2. David Wetherill, *The New Guinea Diaries of Philip Strong 1936-1945*. Macmillan, 1981.
3. David Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*. Baker Academic, 2021.