

Sermon Preached at Christ Church St Laurence, Diocese of Sydney

Sunday 3 September 2023

Feast of the New Guinea Martyrs

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Detail from the Martyrs Chapel, Ballarat Anglican Cathedral

An elderly lady, whose husband had died 30 years before, once told of how each night, before she went to bed, she remembered him. In her mind, she went over his face in detail, until she could see a vision of him clearly in her mind's eye. She had always done this since he died, she said, somewhat embarrassed, because she never wanted him to fade into the forgetfulness of loss.

For her, a vision of his face in her mind's eye was one way he could still be present for her.

Perhaps you can relate to this story from your own experience. After all, unless you're very young, you've probably lost someone close to you and you want their memory to live on in some way.

Today, as we recall the Martyrs of New Guinea (over 300 Christians who died in present day PNG during the Second World War, about a dozen or so of whom were Anglicans), we remember that as God's followers (or saints) on earth, we do not stand alone.

The church on earth is at one with the church in heaven. As God's servants here, we stand with those faithful servants who have gone before us. Yet so often we forget this.

When someone close to us dies much of our grief is caused by their absence. When we open ourselves to friendship, a unique, warm space is created between us and our friend. A safe space hopefully. The tone and shape of this space is something unique to that particular friendship or relationship.

The departure of that friend leaves the space sore with loss.

We feel their absence deeply, and long for their familiar face, their touch, their familiar voice, personality and presence. Of course we long for the presence of the one who has gone.

We are left with absence, but we long for, presence.

Christian writer John O'Donoghue ¹ writes in relation to grief, that presence and absence are sisters. We might think of them as opposites, but he describes them as sisters. Presence and absence.

The ebb and flow of presence and absence is a current that runs through our whole life. Sometimes my father, who died a quarter of a century ago, seems long gone – a distant memory. Other times it feels like he's just in the next room.

The opposite of presence, writes O'Donoghue, is not absence, but vacancy.

Vacancy is indifferent, neutral, has none of the energy of grief. Vacancy has no longing or desire. None of the passion of grief.

On the other hand, the absence we feel so acutely in grief is filled with longing and desire, it cuts deeply into our being and it hurts.

The word absent has its roots in the Latin *Ab-esse*, which means to be *elsewhere*, to be *away from*, but not gone altogether.

While they are now elsewhere, our friends, our loved ones, are still missed, desired and longed for.

We are vulnerable to absence, because we so deeply desire presence. Yet as we get older, we are surrounded by more and more absence. We know more and more about its pain. It's all too familiar to us.

Having grown up in Brisbane, the story of the martyrs was very real. Many Brisbane Anglicans of my granparent's generation had known some of the martyrs personally. Not surprising. Margery Brenchley (one of the martyrs) 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, another of the martyrs, the Rev'd 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, just around the corner in Clayfield.

The Anglican Martyrs of New Guinea were just ordinary Anglicans like you and me. They were present in communities in New Guinea, 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. If you look at their pictures and read their stories they could have been your great grand father, or my grandmother or great aunty.

God is a God of presence. He is not remote and distant, but close. God has been described as the most passionate presence in the universe. As believers we can feel his presence in our hearts through his Holy Spirit who ministers to our deep longings, hurts and grief.

Our Gospel reading today (John 12:20-33) tells us that fullness of life is present on both sides of death. 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. *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).²

I wonder, 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? Research tells us that newcomer, when they are looking to join a church, are looking for a community in which they can belong and seeking relationships of trust.

The martyrs died because they chose to stay on in New Guinea at a time of great risk. Perhaps a risk that was underestimated. But they stayed on because they wanted to be present, and not absent, for the individuals and communities that they served. They would face the risk, the uncertainty, together. From a brief visit to PNG many years ago, including to the graves of some of the Martyrs, I know that the Martyr's witness continues to inspire the church there today.

We are able to rejoice that they and our departed loved ones are still present to us as members of the community of Christ. This is particularly real as we gather for the Eucharist, where the church in heaven and on earth become one.

May we feel the presence of the martyrs with us today as we gather as God's church at this heavenly banquet, before this God of presence in whom no one is ever absent, but united with him, whether here or there.

Do we dare to grasp this vivid and daring hope? This hope of heaven. That one day we will be reunited fully with those, like the martyrs, who have gone before us.

*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. John O'Donoghue, *Eternal Echoes*. Bantam Books, 1998.
2. David Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*. Baker Academic, 2021.