

Sunday 1 September, 2019

*A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne at the Cathedral Confirmation service on the Feast of the New Guinea Martyrs:*

Seventy-seven years ago, this Cathedral held the first memorial service to the New Guinea martyrs. On the evening of Thursday, 15 October 1942, the chair of the Australian Board of Mission and Bishop of Gippsland, Bishop George Cranswick, honoured the witness of twelve Anglicans - clergy, missionaries and teachers - who gave their lives during the invasion of Port Moresby and the northern Oro Province by Japanese forces. Melbourne's newspaper, *The Age*, reported the following day that Bishop George had told the congregation that 'when given an opportunity to go to safety at the time of the Japanese invasion, [they] decided unanimously to stand by their trust. They did what all Christian missionaries had always done—and always would do—they had stood in their place, prepared to face dreadful danger of the worst kind'. Bishop George reminded the congregation at St Paul's that the New Guinea martyrs knew that they were putting their own lives on the line by staying put: 'They had done [this] with their eyes open, knowing they faced possible death' (*The Age*, 16 October 1942, p. 2). They were witnesses of Christ. Their lives were the seeds of faith whose rich harvest is today's Church in Papua New Guinea.

Our reading from the Holy Gospel according to St John speaks vividly of the example of Christ that is set before us, to inspire us in our own witness: 'Very truly, I tell you', Jesus tells the Greeks who had been brought to him by the apostles Philip and Andrew, 'unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain' (John 12.24). A grain that remains unburied, unplanted, bears no fruit, Jesus tells. Only those grains that are spread abroad, cast widely on the ground, only those grains that fall into the soil will germinate and grow, and produce more grain. Conversely, 'if [a grain of wheat] dies, it bears much fruit' (John 12.24). The grains, of course, stand in for the followers of Jesus: we are the grains. Alone we wither and dry out. Together, cast abroad, we show forth our fruitfulness. Christian discipleship, Jesus tells, is lived out together. Our faith is lived not alone, but in community. There are no single grains in the harvest that will endure, Jesus suggests. We live together as a community of faith: and that means sharing in celebration together as well as suffering together. Only grain that is scattered and buried bears a harvest.

Three things are essential parts for bearing fruit, are essential for our discipleship, the short parable Jesus tells, suggests. The willingness to be bound together in community, the willingness to be scattered abroad, and the willingness to lose ourselves in service of Christ and one another:

- When we come together as people of faith, when, like Philip and Andrew in our reading, we bring others to Jesus, we are no longer single grains, but are cast together with other grains, become seed for sowing. Alone, the grain remains a single grain, Jesus tells. But together the grains are seed, and have a far greater success of bearing fruit. Christian life is lived together, and together we have a greater chance at bearing good fruits in service of God, Jesus tells.
- The grains that have been gathered together are taken, Jesus' story suggests, and then are broadcast by hand. They are literally taken and scattered across the field. They fall everywhere. God's field is the world, and Christian people are sent in service of God to the four corners of the field, all across the world. 'Whoever serves me, must follow me', Jesus tells the people. And he assures them that where they are, he will be right among them: 'where I am there my servant will be also' (John 12.26). We are encouraged to go where God sends us, knowing that wherever we are headed Christ will be with us. If we remain faithful in his service, he will remain faithful to us, stand by us in times of hardship and of joy. Christian life is life that being lived out by being sent where Christ directs. And when we willingly follow where Christ calls, then that is already counted as our Christian service.
- Finally, the grains that have been scatted by hand across the field fall into the ground and die. They are scattered across the field, where Jesus casts them. They are buried and die. And as they die, Jesus tells in his story, they bear fruit. Because they show forth their growth by bearing other grains. 'Those who lose their life in this world will keep it for eternal life', Jesus tells the people, but 'those who love their life will lose it' (John 12.25). Those who cling to their own life for life's sake will die, not having borne the fruit of the service to others. Those who let go of their lives, who live their lives in service of God and the service of others, will bear fruit; through the lives of those whose lives they touched with God's love, Jesus tells.

'Whoever serves me', Jesus concludes his story, 'the Father will honour' (John 12.26). When we live in community as people of faith, when we follow where Jesus sends us, when we serve others and are willing to let go of life for the sake of others, we do God's will. And God will honour that service, that sacrifice, by showing us his love and favour. And Jesus himself will show us that service, that sacrifice, our reading concludes, by modelling for us the kind of dying that will bear much fruit. 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified', he tells them. And reminds them that his glorification would be shown forth most fully by his being lifted up on a cross: 'When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself', Jesus says, explaining how he himself would die (John 12.36). And that through his death, we would come to have the life that will enable *us* to become seeds that bear fruit, if we

let ourselves be scattered abroad, and let our selves be lost, in the service of others and God; be buried in Christ's death so that we may bear fruit together.

The New Guinea martyrs whose faithfulness we honour today, were people who, through their lives as well as their deaths, modelled to a future generation what it takes to follow Jesus Christ. What it means together to make known Christ's good news. They did so through their acts of service and witness among the people of Papua and New Guinea. They were people who, Bishop Cransfield reminded the congregation of St Paul's 77 years ago, worked together: 'they carried on in little groups of two or three, without any material protection'. They were not single grains, but seeds cast together. They were strengthened by their companionship and their trust in God's presence with them. They were people who, because they followed where Jesus sent them, knew him to be present among them. 'Very little was heard of them', Bishop George reflected, 'but what news did come through, was constant reference to consciousness of God's presence standing by them, giving them strength'. And in that strength they were willing to lose their lives, providing, as Bishop George put it, 'a supreme Christian witness of spiritual faith and martyrdom' (*The Age*, 16 October 1942, p. 2).

As we give thanks for the example of the martyrs of New Guinea, we give thanks that God continues to call women and men to follow him. We give thanks for those he has called today, and who will enter his service today in this Cathedral. We give thanks that God gives us one another, a community of faith and service, to bear much fruit. We give thanks that he calls us to go, where he sends us, and that he gives us the strength to carry out the service to which he calls each one of us.

'The fearful menace of war' in Papua New Guinea 'would be forgotten', Bishop George rightly predicted 77 year ago at the height of the invasion of the island nation. 'But the story of Christian devotion to duty by women and men' – witnesses to Christ sent where God called them, and people brought to faith through their example and service – 'would always remain' (*The Age*, 16 October 1942, p. 2). Their story, their witness and example, is given us today as an encouragement to enter ourselves in the service to which Christ calls everyone.

'Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life'. Thanks be to God.