

New Guinea martyrs. 2 September 2018. Something has happened. The question is, how to respond?

On October 11 1942 Canon Farnham Maynard began his sermon in St Peter' Eastern Hill, Melbourne, with these words about mission staff in New Guinea:

“James Benson, priest, Sister May Hayman, and Mavis Parkinson have been killed; probably Sep. 1st. Vivian Redlich, priest, John Duffield, Margaret Brenchley, and Lila Lashmar have been taken captive. To these we must add the name of Henry Matthews, priest, likewise a victim of the war and of his faithfulness to the cause of Christ in Papua. It was probably on September 1st last that three Missionaries of the Bishop's staff in New Guinea paid with their lives for their faithfulness to Christ and to the people to whom they had been sent. Of the exact manner and place of their death no statement is yet available. The official report is that they were annihilated.”

It was clear that something had happened, something terrible had happened, to those serving in New Guinea.

The Japanese forces invaded New Guinea and it was clear that the lives of many people would be in danger, including the foreign missionaries serving there. In January 1942 Bishop Philip Strong met with the staff and they considered how best to respond. Unanimously they decided to stay. They knew that there was real and significant danger in staying. But they also knew that to run away and seek only their own safety would be betraying and abandoning the local Christian community. Bishop Strong said at that time:

“If we left all, it would take years for the Church to recover from our betrayal of trust. If we remain — and even if the worst came to the worst and we all were to perish in remaining — the Church would not perish, for there would have been no breach of trust within its walls.”

The Japanese did advance steadily through New Guinea. As they did they killed a large number of people. They killed foreigners where they found them and they killed local people who were seen as threats or who were identified as having worked closely with the missionaries. Canon Maynard did not know but already by the time of his sermon most of the other missionaries he listed, and others too, had already been killed.

Many of those who were serving in New Guinea were from the Anglican Church in Queensland and some had connections here in Toowoomba.

John Barge was born in England and served in the First World War. He migrated to Queensland in 1926. He studied for ministry at St Francis' Theological College in Brisbane, and was ordained a deacon in 1932 and a priest in 1933. His first ministry was at St James, Toowoomba and served at St Thomas' Church, North Toowoomba. In 1935, John Barge volunteered for mission work and was posted to the Diocese of Melanesia: where he served in several places.

After the Japanese advance into the Melanesian islands and New Guinea, communications with the island of New Britain were lost. John Barge remained in his mission post at Apugi and, despite being close to a Japanese post, continued in pastoral and medical ministry without the Japanese knowing for almost two years. In October 1943, a Japanese destroyer spotted the mission house, landed at Apugi and found John Barge openly going about his work. They took him on board the destroyer, and disembarked at Kandrian. Local people witnessed his execution 'with a shot and a sword'. There is an account that the Japanese made John Barge dig his own grave, but the locals themselves buried him in a grave bordered with coral. Word of his execution reached Port Moresby in 1944.

In 1950, Dr Light Shinjiro Maekawa, Anglican Bishop of South Tokyo, arranged for small bamboo crosses to be given to some of the Martyrs' home parishes - including, for John Barge, to St James'. In Japanese characters on each of the crosses is inscribed: 'with regard to God repentance, with regard to man reconciliation'.

Lila Lashmar was mentioned in Canon Maynard's sermon. She came from my previous parish, where she served as a teacher in the parish school. The photographs of her from there show her lovely smile and generous spirit. In that parish there are photograph albums which Lila sent back. They show her engaged in teaching and enjoying a wonderfully close connection with the people among whom she served. In a cabinet in the church building is one of those bamboo crosses.

Lila, along with a nurse, Margery Brenchley, a family including a young boy, and some others were captured were executed on the beach at Buna. A member of one of my previous parishes was the commander of the Australian Forces which retook that area from the Japanese. He told me that their bodies were still on the beach and the cross standing in the centre of the mission compound there was marked by machine gun fire.

Another of the clergy who was killed was the Reverend Henry Matthews. Henry's nephew, Ken Matthews, is a member of this parish. From 1927 to 1942 Henry served as Rector of Port Moresby. He had officially retired and the army were

encouraging him to take safe passage back to Australia. Instead he went to the northern coast to assist in the evacuation of refugees. He was assisting with this work when the boat on which he was serving was attacked and sunk. Also killed in the same boat was Leslie Gariardi, a local Anglican teacher.

On the western end of Westminster Abbey is a façade remembering the sacrifice by 20th century martyrs. One of the New Guinea martyrs is included there. Lucian Tapiendi was a 20 year old Papuan evangelist and teacher. He was murdered by another local man who was assisting the Japanese. That man later became a Christian and changed his name to include the name Lucian.

Something terrible happened there. How can we best respond? I know that some, including that commander of the Australian Forces who liberated the Buna area, never forgave the Japanese people. I spent nearly two weeks in Japan recently and all of the people I met are kind and generous and peaceful. How could it be that war turns some people into monsters? And yet it does. To hold a whole people as responsible for the worst actions of some of their citizens would lead to endless hatred.

Something happened at that time. How was it best to respond? We may question the wisdom of those who stayed. They knew that they might be killed. Yet they chose to remain faithful and to remain with the local people. Remember that for the 200+ foreigners who were killed thousands of the locals were killed as well. Those missionaries staying was a sign which gave life to the church there after the war. The local people knew not only that the missionaries had not abandoned them, but they also knew that God would never abandon them.

In our second reading today we have that powerful question which Paul put to the Roman (Romans 8:33-39). What will separate us from the love of God? Will fear? Will anything break our connection? NOTHING can separate us from the love of God. Not the actions of others. Not our own actions. Being faithful is a choice and is lived out in many ways. It may not always mean literally putting our lives on the line, but it is a real challenge to see how we live being faithful, holding that relationship as being of inestimable value.

The question of how to respond is always with us. As news spread through Palestine of Jesus' ministry people became aware that something was happening. How to respond? Some came to see. Others turned away. As news of Jesus' death began to spread it raised the question of how to respond. Some held their faith. Some fled. As the startling news of Jesus' resurrection began to become known there was the same question. How to respond? Some scoffed and ridiculed the message. Some saw that in this was a glimpse of new life. As the news of the growth of the church and the challenges to the prevailing culture echoed through the ancient world this was scary stuff to be part of. How to respond? Some decided to walk away. Others joined this new experience.

The news that parts of our society, even our government, act and speak and think in ways which undermine the gospel and are completely contrary to the love of God is well known. Imprisoning children and allowing the rape and torture of vulnerable people happens. In our name. Manus Island and Nauru detention centres are an indictment of a society which has lost its values. So also with the incidents of institutional abuse, including within the Church. News of these things circulates and shocks us. How to respond?

As with the martyrs of New Guinea, we are called to respond with faithfulness. Standing alongside the most vulnerable, even at cost to ourselves, is a profound calling. Not allowing threats and even the real danger to deter us. Our government would rather that opponents of their obscene policies just shut up. The call which echoes through this commemoration today is to step up and be present with those who are vulnerable, and to advocate for them when we can.

We remember the martyrs with sadness, those on our Anglican list and the many, many others. And we can have pride in the best sense. These are people who are inspirational. They give us a vision of the church which is passionate about being faithful and true. May it be so with us.

Amen.

Paul Mitchell