

Blood of the Martyrs

a sermon preached on the

Feast of St James, Apostle & Martyr

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Jeremiah 45:1-5, Acts 11:27-12:3, Matthew 20:20-28

"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." So Tertullian is famously alleged to have said. Though, in fact, what he actually said was: "The more you cut us down, the more we grow; the seed is the blood of Christians."¹ Certainly the blood of today's saint, allegedly the first of the apostles to be martyred, became fertile seed in the early church.² The widespread cult of Saint James indeed testifies to the fertility of his bloody seed. It must surely have perplexed the Romans that its brutal executions seemed to have the opposite effect of their intention. The more blood it spilled, the more prolific was the Christian seed!

There is no doubt whatsoever that when Christians have been killed as a consequence of having remained steadfast in their faith this has always prompted an upsurge in devotion and faithfulness, in every era. This should not be surprising, given the nature of the death of Christianity's founder – and his well-known sayings on the matter: "From that time on, Jesus began to show that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering... and be killed."³ "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Humanity will be handed over... and they will condemn him to death... to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised."⁴ "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."⁵ And as we heard from St Paul last week, the church took very seriously Jesus' call to the disciple to undergo the same suffering – indeed to complete in our own bodies the sufferings not fully accomplished in Christ!⁶ According to the evangelist, the One we follow understood that his suffering and innocent death accomplished something not for himself, but for others: "The Son of Humanity came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."⁷

To give his life as a *ransom*, for many. That is the essential principle of martyrdom – that one life freely offered to suffering and innocent death, as witness to the truth, has an effect for others, indeed for many. This notion of 'ransom' became of vital importance in Christian faith. Though there is an insoluble paradox at the core of Christianity on this matter. On the one hand there is the very clear teaching that Christ was *the* ransom – that he offered the one perfect sacrifice, that Christ's blood has accomplished everything, once, and for all. On the other hand there is Jesus' very explicit teaching about the disciple taking up the cross, drinking the cup – as well as St Paul's very clear teaching that Christ's sufferings are not yet complete, and that completion is to be accomplished in the life of Christ's followers. In other words, followers, taking up his cross, are to be the ongoing ransom, for many. Hence the potency of James' martyrdom for the early church. Hence the lasting impact of Tertullian's famous saying.

But what does it mean to be a martyr? How is the follower of Christ to be a 'ransom for many'? What does that actually mean in the life of someone who is baptised into the death and

¹ Tertullian, Apology 50, quoted in Richardson A (ed), *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, London: SCM Press, 1969, p206.
² Acts 12:1-2
³ Matthew 16:21
⁴ Matthew 20:18-19
⁵ Matthew 16:24-25
⁶ Colossians 1:24
⁷ Matthew 20:28

resurrection of Christ? Does blood have to be spilled? There can be little doubt that in its stand against barbarism the church's blood was the very same witness, testament as its Lord. And the whole of Western civilisation is dependent upon Christianity's witness, its courageous stand with its Lord against barbarism.

But, as a glance at history also reveals, the dark side of this is the church's complicity in, indeed enthusiasm for, the shedding of the blood of those who were deemed to be outsiders – Jews, Muslims, so-called 'witches', gypsies, homosexuals, Incas and sundry other indigenous peoples, left-handed persons, so-called 'heretics', the list is grimly and excruciatingly long. We can only hope and pray that humankind is moving beyond the literal, externalised shedding of blood! It may well have been necessary in an earlier stage of human development, but surely the world is crying out for a cessation of the bloodshed? Can Christianity move forward, out of the literal and externalised phase of development, and into the era of the Spirit?

Hoping and praying that it might be so, what does it mean to be a martyr, literally, a witness – to follow in the way of the Son of Humanity who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a *ransom* for many, beyond the literal and externalised shedding of blood?

The only response I feel I can make to this rather pressing question is a somewhat personal one. I have no idea what a 'correct' position might be - even if there is one. But I do know something about my own struggle to be a witness, my struggle to attempt to complete the sufferings of Christ in my own frail flesh. As many of us who attended the Enneagram workshop yesterday were reminded, our greatest attribute is intimately linked with our greatest failing. It is a 'failing' because it is the one thing we must relinquish which we resist to relinquish. There is, at the core, at least one thing which we feel we cannot let go of that stands in the way of true freedom. I know that only the willing, conscious sacrifice of that one thing I cannot let go of opens the door to true service. The degree in which I am able to undergo this willing sacrifice is the degree by which I am able to truly serve.

The *εὐαγγέλιον* *evangelion*, good news is that this willing sacrifice is the means by which the disciple takes up Christ's cross – completes Christ's sufferings – and the means by which the disciple, too, becomes a ransom, for many. Like St James, and all the rest, we too are to be martyr, witness, ransom – which is the seed of the church.

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