

## ADDRESS BY SR ANN SWAILES OP AT THE FISHER MASS, 7 MAY 2018

Why are we here this afternoon? Another way of framing that question would be to borrow words from our first reading and ask, with the seer of the apocalypse, who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come? When we speak of St John Fisher as a member of that white robed army of martyrs, what kind of a claim are we making for him, and what can it possibly have to do with us? What, in other words, is martyrdom, and why should we care about it? Is there even any sense we can possibly make, on this sunny Bank holiday afternoon in Cambridge, of the notion that martyrdom might be our vocation? After all, there must have been sunny spring time afternoons in the Cambridge career of St John Fisher when this would have seemed as unthinkable as perhaps it does to us.

There are plenty who would argue that martyrdom is at best an obsolete irrelevance to our lives, belonging, if anywhere, in stained glass windows and plaster statues, and at worst dreadfully subversive of human flourishing. Used in popular parlance, to betoken a certain kind of emotional blackmail. - Do I detect the odour of burning martyr? Basil Fawcett asks after one of Sybil's more baroque flights of passive-aggressive fancy, on the memorable occasion of his forgetting their wedding anniversary –behind this colloquial usage of the word lie hints of a much darker complicity with victimhood which psychologists have named the martyr complex, providing subjective validation for emotional violence against the despised and hated self. And we cannot forget, either, that the rhetoric of martyrdom has been used throughout history to provide a veneer of legitimation, for *physical* violence against the despised and hated other. It still is so used, and not only by those who are other than us. When, in the summer of 2016, Pere Jacques Hamel was brutally murdered, as he celebrated Mass in rural Normandy, some of the most chilling comments were those that evoked just such a conscription of martyrdom: that of a young woman, for instance, who stated on social media, without any apparent sense of irony, that the Catholics of Europe should embark upon a new crusade, precisely because, in the face of this modern martyrdom, they should refuse to be “lambs led to the slaughter”. One can only assume she had never read today's second lesson.

Whatever might be meant by preparedness for martyrdom, it surely cannot be this.

But how *should* we understand what we are doing today in celebrating St John Fisher specifically as a martyr? It is, after all, a profoundly counter-cultural act we are engaged upon. Many of our contemporaries might allow that Bishop Fisher is worthy of commemoration amongst the architects of the modern university of Cambridge, albeit often, perhaps, with a profoundly myopic view of pedagogical history. They might even respect the quality of his protest in standing out against Henry as an assertion, in the face of establishment oppression, of the rights of individual conscience, however anachronistic it might be to see his decision in those terms. But to summon a festive gathering in joyful commemoration of his judicial murder: how can that be, for the psychologically and politically literate, anything other than pathologically perverse and morbidly provocative?

The derivation of the word martyr from the Greek *marturos*, witness, is of course, well-known. But the embarrassingly simple implications of this etymology are often overlooked, with distorting consequences, precisely because of the technical sense the word has acquired in the vocabulary of the Christian Church. We think, as Christians, of the martyrs as those who do a particular thing, or a particular kind of thing, as a particular kind of thing is done *to* them: The martyrs are those who hold firm to Christ – this is what they do - even to the point of shedding their blood – this is what is done to them.

But witnesses, by definition, are those who see, before they do or suffer anything on account of their vision. It is their seeing that energises their doing and sustains them in their suffering. Martyrs in the Christian sense, then, must witness Christ before, in the slightly odd usage we have come to take for granted, they witness *to* Christ. The martyrs are, above all, those

Christians who *see* Christ, see him as he really is, see him as beautiful and desirable and faithful, and, for that reason are prepared to hold firm to him to the end, trusting that he will hold them firmly too.

What difference might it make to our understanding of martyrdom if we were thus to prioritise seeing over doing or suffering?

In the first place, it might shed a purifying light on some of the pathologies of martyrdom we have been considering. The martyrs, on this account, are, first and foremost, those who look at Jesus, seeing in him an example that they should follow in his steps. And, when we look at Jesus, supremely when we look at him on the cross his martyrs share and emulate, we do not, in fact, see any of what our contemporaries might nervously assume to be the characteristics of martyrs and martyrdom. The New Testament account of the Passion knows nothing of the seduction of despair, of ultimately self-indulgent courting of suffering: Jesus prays to be *spared* the Cross, not embracing it for its own sake, but enduring it for the joy that is set before him, not bestowing a sickly and spurious glamour on suffering, but offering the confident realism of a vision that extends beyond Good Friday to Easter : was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer and so enter into his glory?

And, while the Christian tradition has always loved to describe the events of the first Holy Week using military imagery, and particularly the imagery of military parade and triumph, this is surely less to scaffold than to destabilise our conventional notions of the relationship between might and right. If Christians wish to talk of the noble army of martyrs, we can only do so in a sense so paradoxical as to be almost ironic.

Pope St Gregory the Great, for instance, considering the question why Our Lord rebuked the women of Jerusalem for the tears with which they greeted him on the way to Calvary concludes that this is because weeping is inappropriate behaviour on a victory procession. And the *via dolorosa* from the judgment hall to Golgotha is a victory procession, precisely because it does not look like one, in the eyes of the world, nor perhaps, if we are honest, in our own eyes. This victory is the victory of suffering love over naked power, the victory of Christ the King over the Prince of this world whom he defeats not by superior firepower but by changing decisively the rules of engagement. Good Friday is as much a triumph as Easter Day, but only because it is part of the *same* triumph: the victory of the almighty life-giving love of God over every deathly thing we can throw at it, including our own will to power.

Looking steadily at the sacrifice of Jesus, then, forbids as seeing it as either a perverse exaltation of weakness or an uncritical canonisation of strength. And that, it turns out, has profound implications for how we see the practice of Christian martyrdom too.

Several accounts of early Christian martyrs stress that the one suffering for the name finds in Jesus not only inspiration from the past but present companionship: it is a matter not of theoretical insight, but of actual sight, and, vivid, sometimes visceral, intimacy. St Felicity, giving birth in prison, and taunted by her Roman jailer for her weakness as she cries out in her anguish, is able to assure him that whilst now she alone undergoes the pain of labour, she knows that, tomorrow, in the arena, her Lord will be suffering in her. The martyrs witness, perceive, feel Christ, moving among, even within them.

But – crucially – in other texts from the first centuries of the Church there is a kind of reciprocity at work whereby the martyrs are not merely witnesses of Christ, but, for each other and for the communities from which they are drawn, also icons of Christ. They witness Christ in himself, and others witness Christ in them. In some cases, such as that of the slave woman Blandina, who suffered in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century persecution of the Church in southern France, the icon was a graphic one: as the wild beasts surged around the stake to which she was fastened, the fastening of Christ to the cross was inescapably invoked. Somewhat like the Israelites gazing on the bronze serpent in the wilderness and finding healing there, Blandina's contemporaries were

strengthened by their vision of her for what lay ahead for them. The martyrs enable us to witness, perceive, feel Christ, moving among, even within us.

It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the pathologies of martyrdom, the glorification of suffering and violence that we seek for in vain in the case of Christ himself are often conspicuous by their absence also in the derivative sacrifices made by his friends. Not universally, or always unambiguously so: fallen human nature is prey to many perversities, and, sadly, this is true of fallen Christian human nature also. But, in general, the cries of the martyrs belie any desire to be stronger than their Lord; their frequent echoes of his first word from the cross - Father, forgive them - forbids, or should forbid, a recruitment of their pain to any cause other than his. And, to give one example touchingly close to our hearts, there is little sign of the self-hatred that would deny the doctrine of a good creation in our own John Fisher's insistence on wrapping up warm on his way to the block, lest he should fail at the last to be a good steward of the flesh his Master entrusted to him.

There is one more way, perhaps the deepest, in which witnessing Christ enables the martyr to witness to Christ.

St Stephen, conventionally, is regarded as the proto-martyr of our faith: the first disciple of Christ voluntarily and thus unambiguously to shed his blood for the Lord. But the first person in the NT to *describe* himself as a martyr is St Peter, in a sermon recorded in the Acts of the Apostles in which he places himself among those who God preordained to be a martyr, a witness, of the Resurrection. The text gains, of course, poignancy from the dramatic irony with which we inevitably read it: this martyr in the literal sense, who was glad when he *saw* the Lord, restored to him after the humiliation and horrors of the First Good Friday, this martyr in the literal sense is preordained to be a martyr in the conventional sense also, when he is old, and another will lead him where he does not wish to go. But it is worth noticing something else about Peter's assertion of his martyr-status. He, and his fellow martyrs did not merely see the Lord. They ate and drank with him. For us, there is an inescapable evocation here of what we are doing this afternoon, an unmistakable allusion to the eating and drinking of the Eucharist. And it is precisely in the Mass that we find the wellspring of just this reciprocity we have been exploring, whereby, in seeing Christ, and strengthened by his vision, we enable others to see Christ in us. In the Mass, after all, Christ not only enters into us, but, simultaneously draws us into himself, so that "the Body of Christ" names both the gift of Holy Communion enshrined at the heart of the Mass, and its recipients. When we name the Church as the body of Christ, and ourselves as members of that body, we are not invoking a dead metaphor, as when speaking of the governing body of a sports federation, political party or indeed Cambridge college. The Church is truly, not merely metaphorically, the body of Christ, and that body we are, the body we enter into at baptism and in which we are built up by our reception of all the sacraments. But the body of Christ is the body of the lamb slain before the foundation of the world, and we share his suffering that we might also share his glory. The martyrs make the implications of this especially, and unquestionably sometimes disturbingly clear: it is not grotesque presumption, but accurate sacramental theology when descriptions of the bodily sufferings of the martyrs unmistakably evoke the Eucharistic elements: when Ignatius of Antioch speaks of the teeth of the beasts grinding his flesh into flour, when the pyre on which Polycarp burns is likened to an oven for baking the bread of sacrifice. This, however challenging, is ultimately not threat but profound consolation. It bestows, not on our sufferings – which would be pathological perversion to a degree - but on us *in* our sufferings an unthinkable, unimaginable dignity, since our sufferings are those of him whose sufferings redeemed the world.

And that, finally, is the answer to the question with which we began. Who are these, clad in white robes, robes as white as the Eucharistic host, and whence have they come? They, we, are Christ, Christ in his broken and glorified body the Church, given for the life of the world. And, in this white robed army, we, with St John Fisher and all the martyrs, are all of us enrolled.

