

Monday Eastertide week 4

English Martyrs

Monday 4 May 2020

Acts 7:55-60,

Matthew 10:17-20

“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” So said Tertullian, a second/third century Christian writer. The feast of the “English Martyrs” celebrates those men and women, old and young, priests, lay, rich and poor, who witnessed to their faith in Jesus Christ, to the death. On this day we give thanks to God for their courage amidst persecution and their determination to not only practice the faith, but to teach and help others to deepen their faith in Christ. Catholics were denied the sacraments (does that sound familiar?) but unlike today, there was no online Masses, WhatsApp groups, Zoom prayer groups and Facebook pages to keep them together. They were kept together quite often by brave men and women of all walks of life. Men went abroad for formation; Jesuits to Rome, and secular priests to Douai in France to be formed and ordained. Then they came back, knowing that as a priest it was considered to be treason to step ashore. Then there were the men and women who sheltered the priests in their home and who accompanied them on their travels. This too was considered treason. Let’s look at a couple of examples: St. Henry Walpole was baptised and raised in the Church of England, but witnessing St. Edmund Campion’s martyrdom at Tyburn, London in 1581, he became a Catholic, and resolved to join the Jesuits. Following formation in Rome, he returned to England and was eventually arrested and martyred in York alongside another priest, Blessed Alexander Rawlins.

St. Anne Line was a widow who ran a home for priests in hiding. She is mentioned in John Gerrard’s amazing autobiography, (John Gerard S.J. *The Autobiography of an Elizabethan*, which is inspiring to read, if you have not already), and was arrested following a tip-off on whilst Mass was being celebrated in 1601. At her hanging, she publicly declared, "I am sentenced to die for harbouring a Catholic priest, and so far I am from repenting for having so done, that I wish, with all my soul, that where I have entertained one, I could have entertained a thousand."

Finally, we can see the example of St. Nicholas Owen, a layman builder and craftsman from our own diocese (he grew up in Oxford) who designed extraordinary hiding places for priests. By day he worked as a travelling carpenter under various aliases and by night he worked alone to design unique hiding places for priests. There are a number in Harvington Hall in our own diocese. He gave himself up at Hindlip Hall in Worcestershire, to deflect the search party from Fr Henry Garnet,

another Jesuit priest. St. Nicholas died in the Tower of London as a result of injuries caused when he was racked, for refusing to divulge his secret hiding places.

Our readings at Mass today show is that the Christian life is not easy: St. Stephen, the proto-martyr, was stoned, and in the Gospel, Jesus warns us that we will be dragged before secular courts.

However, we are assured that the Holy Spirit would come to our aid at these times.

The Responsorial Psalm, however, is really worth praying and making our own.

Psalm 30(31):3-4,6,8,17,21

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.

Be a rock of refuge for me,

a mighty stronghold to save me,

for you are my rock, my stronghold.

For your name's sake, lead me and guide me.

Into your hands I commend my spirit.

It is you who will redeem me, Lord.

As for me, I trust in the Lord:

let me be glad and rejoice in your love.

Let your face shine on your servant.

Save me in your love.

You hide them in the shelter of your presence

from the plotting of men.

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.

Let us like the martyrs, trust in Christ and never shy from witnessing to our faith in Him.

Holy Martyrs of England, pray for us.

Carol Ann Harnett 4th May 2020