

Read the Archbishop of Canterbury's sermon as delivered today at a Eucharist at Exeter Cathedral commemorating the 150th anniversary of the martyrdom of Bishop John Coleridge Patteson, the first Bishop of Melanesia.



Acts 7:55-end, John 15:12-17

It is quite overwhelming to be here today to celebrate the legacy of Bishop Patteson and our profound friendship with the Melanesian church.

The passages we have heard today speak of martyrdom, of an example and of a command. Patteson is both what the church calls a red martyr and a white martyr. Red in the shedding of his blood; white in the martyrdom holy living: his endless work, study, learning of languages, care for the people of Melanesia and fight for justice, his planting and building of churches – all testify to his holiness, making oneself available to God without reservation.

We were in his father's library earlier today, who gave his blessing to his son's mission by saying: "I give him wholly, not with any thought of seeing him again." His father, through that, had his own martyrdom.

We remember that the word martyr comes from the Greek martur, meaning witness. Every Christian is called to that form of martyrdom! To testify, to witness, to the person of Jesus Christ. The Melanesian Mission consecrate their lives as witnesses to Christ. And the Melanesian Brothers have in recent years given their lives in the cause of reconciliation and peace – imitating Patteson, following Christ, leaving all behind.

On the shore where Patteson died was erected a cross. It was inscribed with the words: 'Whose life was taken by men for whom he would freely have given it.'

Commenting on our passage from John's Gospel, Pope Gregory the Great said: "Our Lord came to die for his enemies, but he says that he is going to lay down his life for his friends, to show that by loving we are able to gain over our enemies, so that they who persecute us are by anticipation our friends."[\[1\]](#)

Patteson's apparent enemies, his persecutors, became the friends of his memory and the celebration of his death.

Dr Martin Luther King, imitating Abraham Lincoln, said: "I will destroy my enemies by making them my friends." Patteson's death did make friends of his enemies, and that death and its fruit speak powerfully to us today, shining the light of the scriptures into our hearts so that witness and word come together and invite us to new desires: desires for a deeper walk with our saviour Jesus Christ.

It was not just Patteson who made sacrifices for the sake of the Gospel in this story. We remember the bravery of those who followed him into an unknown life, leaving their families and homes behind. It is Melanesians today, who amidst the trials of climate change, of poverty, of suffering, witness – men and women both – to the transforming power of Christ and the salvation he brings.

Patteson's life and ministry focussed on calling people into relationship with one another. He speaks in his letters of 'the deep human feelings and sympathies which belong to us all alike.'

He modelled the radical Christian community to which we are called today, a community which transcends the boundaries of class, race and tribe. Patteson wrote: 'We make no distinction whatever between English and Melanesian members of the Mission as such. No Melanesian is

excluded from any office of trust, nor would he be deterred from occupying the position of most authority in the Mission if he were found fit to hold it. Someday Melanesian bishops may preside over native churches throughout the islands of the sea.' In 1868 he ordained the first Melanesian minister, George Sarawia, as a deacon.

And indeed today the Church in Melanesia is among the healthiest in the Anglican Communion – an example to all of us, especially here.

Patteson didn't mistake reconciliation for assimilation: he dreamt of a church that was distinctly Melanesian, led by its own people and with its own face, expression and identity. Christianity with a Melanesian face.

He knew that the boundless and infinite nature of God was more than enough to hold and welcome each and every one of us, in all our diversity and difference.

Of course, he also had a great gift of friendship. We know he was a tremendous linguist, learning 23 Melanesian languages – not as an academic exercise, but because he wanted to understand and communicate with Melanesian people. Patteson knew that relationship is at the heart of Christ.

Many years later, we still need to learn in the Church that we must do things for people and with people, rather than to people. He spoke of the boys who accompanied them – 'They see that we are their servants just as much and I hope more than they are ours.'

A deep part of Patteson's work on reconciliation was his desire for justice. Warning against the consequences of 'blackbirding' he said: 'I desire to protest in anticipation against any punishment being inflicted upon natives of these islands who may cut off vessels or kill boats' crews, until it is clearly shown that these acts are not done in the way of retribution for outrages first committed by white men.' Patteson spoke prophetically into this grave injustice – and soon after, by his death, was an advocate for that very same call to justice.

I have no doubt that today Patteson would be crying out against the injustice of climate change and what it is doing to the life of the people of Melanesia.

Even upon his death, this example continued. At the behest of clergy and laypeople around the world, his violent death was met not with retaliation and revenge, but calls for justice and reconciliation. His death expedited legislation to end the labour trade, breaking cycles of pain and injustice in a truly Christ-like way.

Later, the example of the Melanesian martyrs who died in their pursuit of peace amidst violent conflict spawned an international peace keeping mission, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) – again, the Melanesian Brothers responded to violence and loss with the profound peace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ, in the most agonising circumstances.

This transformation of violence to reconciliation is another hallmark of Patteson's life and legacy. Of course, his own life was totally changed, but by the transformative power of God, Melanesia was changed too, and by His Grace, today the global church is transformed by the Church of Melanesia, its example and witness.

We look to the passage in John, "that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last." Out of the Melanesian Mission, and out of the Melanesian church, lasting fruit has been born to the glory of God.

Finally, faithfulness. There is a dialectic between God's faithfulness and our own. We are called to faithfulness in loving one another and loving Jesus as what we desire above all things. God's faithfulness calls us, for no-one calls themselves, and our faithful response to that call, reveals ever more of God's faithfulness.

In a church that struggles with the culture around it, that often feels isolated, that proclaims the love of Christ in an age of individualism, that calls for us to identify with Christ when the instinct of the age is to self-identify and decide who we are—in that age we are called to faithfulness, to God in Jesus, to holiness, to one another.

We are called to courage. We are called to witness in holiness, not in division amongst ourselves. Most of all we are called to the love for God that reveals the love of God, of Christ at his right hand, of the love for one another that gave Stephen the courage, that called Patteson and that bears much fruit.

There are many ways we can interpret Patteson's death. I will end with the words of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, who said:

'...this event may be regarded in different lights: the brightest crown of a life of Christian heroism, as an honour reflected for the first time in this age on the office of the bishop in our Church, as a severe and humbling warning from on High against the frequent acts of violence and injustice by which Christianity has been disgraced in the eyes of the heathen; but it becomes us now to acknowledge it as a trial to us all, permitted by God, whose teaching will be soonest understood by those who wait on him in patience and in prayer.'

So may we, here, in this diocese and in the Church around the world, as we remember Patteson, may we wait on Him who is always faithful, in patience and in prayer, that He may lead us in loving, tending and serving a holy church.

Amen.

[1] Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels*. Volume 4: St John (Sumas: Veritatis Splendor Publications 2012) p.284.

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