

2020 1029 Havant

In the south transept of Southwark Cathedral there is a memorial to a man who lived from 1475 to 1556.

Those were tumultuous years for England and its church. In 1535 the Bishop of Rochester, John Fisher and Thomas More, the Lord Chancellor, were beheaded. Twenty years later Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley, former bishops of Worcester and London respectively, were burnt at the stake to be followed in 1556 by Thomas Cranmer, previously Archbishop of Canterbury

Perhaps before we feel too sorry for all these martyrs we might just remember that More and Latimer at least had themselves played prominent parts in the condemnation and execution of a number of those they considered heretics.

Many terrible things were done by the disciples of Jesus Christ to other disciples of Jesus Christ, and in both cases persecutors and victims alike thought they were doing God's will. There followed a bloody century in which there were more Christian martyrs in England than ever before or since.

Given this history, it is perhaps not surprising that so many people by and large reckon Christianity scarcely worth the candle if its adherents could do such things. The other side of this is that they simply can't believe that any faith could so grip people as to enable them to endure such things.

But Fisher, More, Latimer, Ridley and Cranmer would have understood each other far better than any of them would have understood the exceptional irreligiosity of England today, Catholic or Protestant.

What drove those Reformation martyrs, what has driven all the martyrs throughout the ages, was the conviction that the truths of faith are truths, and that they are worth dying for. That is one of the reasons why we find the past so inaccessible and indeed not only the past, but also the greater part of the world today.

The question really is, is there anything that matters so much to us that we would be willing to die for it?

Now the point of my mentioning the memorial in Southwark Cathedral lies in the final words of the epitaph. Bear in mind those dates: 1475 – 1556. The text concludes, "*He lived and died an honest man*". We know little of the details of his life, or how he comported himself in the midst of the political and religious turmoils of those tyrannical times. We do not know whether he found a careful way of negotiating without sacrifice of principle or whether he just kept his head down. We do however get a sense of integrity and straightforwardness - and that he survived with those virtues intact! That's no mean tribute.

To maintain integrity and straightforwardness is always a challenge and very particularly in times of crisis like the present pandemic. Different difficulties from those of the sixteenth century, but the challenge no less.

I'm prompted to say this today because yesterday was the feast of two of the early martyrs of the Church, Simon and Jude. We don't know much about either of them, although Simon's nickname "the zealot" gives us a clue. This doesn't mean that he was enthusiastic but rather that he had belonged to a particular group of contemporary terrorists determined to overthrow the Roman occupation by force. His conversion transformed his zeal from violence into faithful discipleship. The very passion which had previously made him so angry became the source of the bravery that led him to martyrdom.

Like the figure in the Southwark memorial, Simon and Jude are honoured for their steadfastness, their honesty in the midst of turbulent times. Unlike him, they paid for their honesty with their lives.

Honesty and zealotry have their dangers, but indifferentism may in the long run be an even greater danger. No one should doubt the capacity of religion, gone wrong, to do great harm. But equally, no one should doubt its capacity to motivate to the greatest deeds of love and sacrifice, the most fearless intellectual enquiry and the most beautiful and uplifting art. The knack for human life lies in the constant struggle to distinguish the two.