

London's Martyrs & Christian Unity

The Revd Prebendary Peter Elvy, recently Vicar, Chelsea Old Church

It is a very great honour to be invited here this morning – to this holy spot. I was very impressed, when Ann Widdecombe decided to become a Roman Catholic, that she took an additional name – the name of Hugh – not Hugh of Lincoln, but Hugh Latimer, the martyred Protestant bishop who said those famous words to Bishop Ridley (they were tied back to back and Ridley was sadly upwind of the flames and suffered more), “Be of good cheer, Master Ridley; for today by God’s grace we shall light such a candle in England as shall by God’s grace never be put out.”

My own former church on the Chelsea embankment is a monument to the swings and roundabouts of Tudor Church history. Henry VIII is said to have been betrothed to Jane Seymour there, Thomas More served mass there daily, Lady Jane Grey is buried there, Queen Elizabeth I lived nearby when she was under suspicion, illegitimate and heir to the throne all at the same time. More’s statue presides outside over the traffic. It is a famous statue with a gold face. Sir John Rothenstein resigned from the committee when he saw the statue. My own theory – backed up by the family - is that it is not the face of More at all, but looks identical to Laurence Olivier.

Now how do we manage the memories of those cruel times? Do we say – as we might say of Northern Ireland, or Serbs and Croats – “A plague on both their houses: they’re as bad as each other.” What do we say in this hallowed place, dedicated to the memory of Catholic martyrs who died for their faith about Protestant martyrs who died with equal courage for theirs? Obviously we tend to focus on the amazing Tudor dynasty: Henry VII who founded it; Henry VIII who feared he might be the last unless he could have an heir, but who was never a Protestant and indeed had them harried and burned; - and then the great royal pendulum began to swing wildly - Protestant Edward; Catholic Mary; and

Anglican Elizabeth. And the swings of the pendulum gave many good men and women – too many – the martyr's crown. That is where we English Catholics and Protestants naturally focus. Of course it does not require too much imagination to remember and honour, and perhaps invoke, those who were the victims. On this spot, I can and do acknowledge, or try to - I can empathise, or try to – with the suffering and the heartache and the courage of those who died so horribly. I do not think that that is the problem. The problem that still haunts is, "How can I cope with the fact that these things were done in the name of Christ our king?" That is my problem with Thomas More: I bow before his constancy and conviction, but More the hunter of heretics is less attractive. I am horrified that Queen Elizabeth's archbishop of Dublin had the feet of his Catholic predecessor roasted. Can my church be built on such cruelty? I have to say that I shudder in Westminster Cathedral when I look up at the list of archbishops – and there is Thomas Cranmer, a canonical archbishop in the Catholic line and after his name the word 'Deposed'. If he had been deposed only that would be fine; but of course this complex but brilliant man was tied to a stake and burnt alive – as well as for a variety of reasons – for so-called heresy (I say 'so-called', because much of what he wrote would sail through an ARCIC consultation today) and for declaring Princess Mary illegitimate all those years before.

We must keep no score of wrongs, but the wrongs on all sides of Christian history are writ appallingly large. Look at the Latin Christians in Constantinople raping and pillaging – and I am as much a Latin Christian as you when we go back that far. Look at the Albigensian crusade – so called – or the massacres in France. What about the Protestants who died for their faith, not under 'Bloody' Mary but under Henry VIII – Bilney, the inoffensive John Frith and the other proto-Lutherans.

I come from a very Anglican family and a very determined and Protestant mother. My first Catholic girlfriend worried her greatly: If I married her it would kill (apparently) my father. Then I fell in love with a bar maid, a very respectable bar

maid, but that too would 'kill my father' (although he seemed quite relaxed!). But we were very Anglican. And I ended up in Cambridge at Ridley Hall, where stamped in gold on every service book it said – in Latin of course – “Remember the martyrs.” And I suppose I thought that Latimer was right. Our martyrs did light quite a candle and that all that I love in my Christian tradition - the doctrine, the freedom, the worship, the glorious language of Bible and Prayer Book – would not be there, if men like Ridley had not taken their stand. But now, at the other end of my life, I do not see this umbilical cord quite so clearly. Of course there is a linearity – back through our martyrs and heroes and saints to the apostolic Church. We all believe in this linear process that has brought the truth to our generation; but the joke is that the lines are a bit different. Yet the point I make is this: after forty years – forty years in two weeks – since my ordination as priest, my journey of faith is not only supplied from a base camp 2,000 years ago and another one at the Reformation. We are not only historians. My supply lines, my books, my friends, my projects, my worship, my hymns are in a much broader Christian tradition than when I set out. Perhaps it is ecumenism, possibly it is just life and age and the realities of modern Europe; but it is wonderful. I can now be a Christian – a Latin Christian, I hope.

Last month I slept in a guest house on the edge of the great aerodrome North of Calais where so much of THEIR battle for Britain was centred. And I could almost sense the same kind of men that our war films have glamourised – but on the other side. Young men in their twenties – in flames – screaming for their mothers: just like our young men. I have been stopping off a lot lately in the huge war cemeteries across Northern France. Our men and their allies lie in their hundreds of thousands, in serried ranks, still on parade. The Canadian cemetery at Vimy is on the very edge of the ridge that so many young men from the lakes and the prairies stormed and eventually won. I have been to other battlefields in my life, in Eastern Europe especially, where there are no enemy graves. They are simply in pits, or ploughed up. I have come to one conclusion – in war, the winners get much better cemeteries. But we honour all sides today – one equal standard of

cemetery – each equally honoured. Whether I personally should repent about what Queen Elizabeth's horrid archbishop did to his poor predecessor I am not sure. I suppose in this linear sense the bad guy and I are connected. No - I am beginning to speak nonsense: we are not connected. The linearity is one-directional. There is no going back. Why should I repent for the sins of my fathers? I do not have to go and apologise for the Archbishop of Dublin. He's not my problem. And I do not expect you to apologise to me for the awful Dr Smith who preached – yes, preached – at the martyrdom of Latimer and Ridley. The Bible says – I'll end like a good Protestant - that the sins of the fathers shall be visited on succeeding generations. That is the problem – a heritage of hate that sweeps up to us. But we have - every day – a fresh start. May that be for us today. Today is the day to light Latimer's candle - and to counter heresy (there's plenty of it about) – not with heat but with light.