

**A sermon preached by the Dean of Chichester, the Very Revd Nicholas Frayling, at the Church of St Peter, Woodmancote on the occasion of the Dedication of a Memorial to the Woodmancote Martyrs, THOMAS HARLAND and JOHN OSWALD, on Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> June 2010, the 454<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their deaths.**

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I enormously appreciate the invitation to come and preach to you this morning, and the privilege of dedicating the Memorial in the churchyard on this historic occasion. Your action in creating the memorial to the Woodmancote Martyrs, Thomas Harland and John Oswald, is very important. These men gave their lives for the truth as they saw it, and have left us an example of extraordinary courage and Christian witness in the face of persecution. But, as I hope to show in a moment or two, today is about more than merely remembering.

It is with remembering, though, that we must begin. King Henry VIII broke with the Church of Rome in order to try to secure a male heir. This led, according to your theological point of view, either to the formation of the Church of England or to the continuation of the Catholic Church in England, without allegiance to Rome. At any rate, the first Prayer Book of 1549 was much more Catholic in tone and theology than the Book of Common Prayer of 1662, which we know and still use. The Bible was to be read in English in every Parish Church, and worship offered in the language of the people.

Mary Tudor acceded to the throne in 1553 and determined to return England to Catholicism. The reforms were reversed, the Mass was reintroduced, and the Bible was to be read in Latin. But people had become attached to the new ways, and many continued to worship in their homes and in places other than churches, in English, and in accordance with their beliefs.

That is the context for today's commemoration. John Oswald, a husbandman, or agricultural labourer, and Thomas Harland, a carpenter, lived in Blackstone and worshipped here at St Peter's. As you, the people of Woodmancote know, I expect, the contemporary records give us their own words. John 'refused to say anything when questioned (by the Bishop of London) saying that he would only speak when he could see his accusers face to face.' Thomas 'refused to attend church, because the service was in Latin, and he could not understand it.'

Like their more eminent contemporary, Martin Luther, these two men gave their testimony without compromising their beliefs. Luther had said, 'Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scripture, or by clear reason... I am bound by the Scriptures I

have quoted and my conscience is captive to the word of God. I...will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience.'

Luther was a fine scholar: John Oswald and Thomas Harland were simple men, just like the disciples of Jesus; but they wanted to know and obey God's word, and the plain fact is, the Church would not let them.

For us, in an era of comparative religious toleration, at least among Christians, it is hard to get under the skin of those ancient conflicts; but of course, our very faith was born in conflict by the blood of the Cross of Jesus Christ, who mysteriously promised not peace but a sword.

Religion is concerned with the deep things of people's lives, and it is for the deep things that men and women have been prepared to lay down their own lives throughout Christian history, and still are today. Your Martyrs, John and Thomas, showed astounding courage before the flames: they could have saved their lives by coming back to this church and listening to the Mass, but they refused to compromise.

Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* records John Oswald as saying "Fire and fagots could not make me afraid"; so was he ready to suffer and come after, and would be glad thereof.'

Which brings us to today, and the question 'What about us?' Well, we have come to remember these men – just as we remember whenever we come to the Eucharist, the Holy Communion, the Mass, the Lord's Supper. 'Do this in remembrance of me' was the instruction of Jesus to his followers in every age.

There is power in remembering, but there is much more to remembrance than glorying in the past, or pride or nostalgia. The Greek word for remembrance is *ANAMNESIS*, which conveys also a sense of making present. 'Do this in remembrance of me' takes on a whole new meaning: we remember in order to make present and move forward.

In our Scripture readings today, we heard of some Greeks who came to Philip with the request, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Jesus, when he heard, responded with a deep reflection on 'the hour': 'The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified.'

In St John's Gospel, the writer often depicts Jesus as waiting for the hour, the moment when he would perform the work for which he was destined – the hour which would change history. That could only come about through the death of the man Jesus on the cross: only then might the world understand the God who would not spare himself, but gave himself for sinful humanity.

So the lifting up of Jesus on the cross is also his exaltation in glory. Once the power of the cross is recognized, the powers of darkness cannot prevail. It is not force but sacrificial love that brings about redemption – the power that lies in powerlessness. In down-to-earth language, which would have been well understood by the Woodmancote Martyrs, Christians are to prefer others over themselves, and if called upon to do so, they are to sacrifice themselves for others, as did the Lord of Glory. This they are prepared to do because of the glorious assurance of eternal life, which is given us in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

That is the context of Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, with its description of the light which has shone out of darkness in our hearts – and the inspiring declaration that, though Christ's people may be crushed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, they are not overcome... 'so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.'

Imagine the impact of those words on people like John and Thomas, who discovered them for the first time; and beware the familiarity which so easily breeds, if not contempt, then complacency in those who know the words so well.

So there is real power in our remembering today, as we make present the sacrifice of John Oswald and Thomas Harland, in the context of the great act of remembrance which is the Holy Eucharist. We do not know how those Greeks responded to Jesus and his teaching about his hour which was to come, or whether or not they followed him as disciples.

But what we do know is the way in which John Oswald and Thomas Harland responded to God's word, and in a real sense that is what has brought us together today.

If I may say so, the presence of Bishop Kieran Conry the Roman Catholic Bishop of Arundel and Brighton, adds a very special and gracious element to the proceedings, because in that turbulent and terrible era of English history, as well as the Protestant Martyrs, more than 300 Catholics were put to death in horrible ways. These were not for heresy, but for treason, following the excommunication by the Pope of Queen Elizabeth I, and the encouragement of plots to assassinate her. We remember the so-called 'popish plots' from our school history lessons. That is the context of the Spanish Armada and the Gunpowder Plot...

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the ecumenical movement has come into being. It is, I think, rather stuck at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>, but what it has done is to enable Christians who

once killed or plotted against each other to listen and talk, to pray together and to worship, in the knowledge that what unites them is so much more significant than all that divides.

We remember the historic moment in 1982 when Pope John Paul II was received and embraced by Archbishop Robert Runcie in Canterbury Cathedral, and how they went together to pray before pictures of the Martyrs – Protestant and Catholic – as two Christian leaders, united in faith, common witness and real friendship. There is an awful long way to go before we can fulfill our Lord's desire that 'all may be one', but we are on the way, and what you in Woodmancote have enabled to happen today, is one more step along the road to reconciliation and unity.

The African-American writer Maya Angelou wrote some remarkable words. She was referring to the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade in the southern states of America, but her words have much wider resonance, and I am sure they will speak to us today:

**'History despite its wrenching pain  
Cannot be un-lived, but if faced  
With courage need not be lived again.'**

That is a kind of remembering – the kind that matters: to look at the past with real courage, and in the light of that looking, to move on – sadder, perhaps, but wiser, too. That must be our task.

For the Martyrs, that 'moving on' has involved the great leap into eternity, secure in their faith in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. TS Eliot, in the Christmas morning Sermon that he put into the mouth of Archbishop Thomas à Becket in Canterbury Cathedral in his play *Murder in the Cathedral*, expressed the unique contribution of the Martyrs in these words, with which I conclude, and explained, for all of us, why their contribution matters so very much:

'A martyrdom is never the design of man; for the true Martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God; not lost it but found it, for he has found freedom in submission to God. The Martyr no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of martyrdom. So thus, as on earth, the Church mourns and rejoices at once, in a fashion that the world cannot understand, so in Heaven the saints are most high, having made themselves most low, seeing themselves not as we see them, but in the light of the Godhead from which they draw their being.'

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