

And all the martyr throng...

Sunday, 15 February, 2015 ds. Don Mader

Scripture lessons: Jonah 4:1-11; I Maccabees 2:1-29; Mark 10:32-34

Martyrs and martyrdom seem to be in the air at the moment, so it is perhaps worth taking out one sermon to say a word about it.

It is the right moment in the church year to do so. This coming Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, the turning point – quite literally – between the season of Epiphany, of the revelation and proclamation of the Word, from the presentation of Jesus in the Temple and the visit by the Wise Men, through the ministry of Jesus and the Transfiguration, to the moment when Jesus 'turns his face toward Jerusalem', where the events of the Passion, the crucifixion and resurrection will be enacted. No matter what your view on Christology, after the execution of John the Baptist, and in light of the hostility of the authorities, Jesus must have known that to go up to Jerusalem was to set up a confrontation with almost certain fatal consequences.

But martyrs and martyrdom are also in the news. Most obviously, in the form of the jihadis, the radical Muslims travelling off to Syria and Iraq to seek martyrdom – and occasionally returning to seek their martyrdom here. I hasten to say that this is not just a Muslim problem: we Christians have had our shares of jihadis too. A millenium ago, during the preaching of the crusades, they were literally Syriagangers, who were promised a fast track to heaven if they died during the attempts to 'liberate' the Holy Land from the Muslims, just as the jihadis are promised an express trip to Paradise today. But there has been a continuing history of such martyrs in Christianity: the mutual martyrs and making of martyrs between Roman Catholics and Protestants during the Reformation is a case in point. Nor is this ancient history: our opening hymn today, a poem by the American anti-slavery activist James Russell Lowell, honours John Brown, who regarded it as his Christian duty to end slavery at any cost and took up arms in his attack on Harper's Ferry in 1859 – and was executed for it. There is even, if you will, your Dutch 'suicide bomber' Jan van Speijk, who blew up his ship – and a number of revolting Belgians who had come down to the docks to witness what they thought was going to be his surrender – in Antwerp in February, 1831.

Although his exploit is no longer featured in your vaderlandse gescheidenis books, people of that generation born before 1950 will know the story – and understand that it also had its religious aspect: this too was a Holy War of a sort, one dimension of the Belgian revolt was the differences between the Protestant northern Netherlands and Catholic south.

But there has also been a more positive light on martyrdom this last month: 45 years after archbishop Oscar Romero, of El Salvador, was assassinated by American trained and supported death squad while offering Mass because of his outspoken Christian opposition to the injustice and violence in that country – and four decades of opposition to any efforts toward his

beatification by the last two Popes – Pope Francis has declared him a martyr for the faith, and opened the way to considering Romero for sainthood.

The term martyr goes back to the Greek word *martus*, which has a range of meanings from witness to martyr. It's most frequent use in the New Testament texts is for the apostles, those who in their preaching and evangelism, witness to Christ. But our Western languages have sharpened this distinction: in English, in these passages *martus* is translated 'witness', while 'martyr', the literal translation, is reserved for those, from St. Stephen on, who gave their lives for their witness. (Dutch works the same way, with the distinction between "getuigenis" and 'martelaar'.) In this sense, Martin Luther King and Oscar Romero are clearly martyrs, dying for their witness to Christ, and to Christian values.

But there is another, and less edifying strand to this question of martyrs, which I suppose has to be traced back to the prophet Elijah and his slaughter of the 950 prophets of Baal, after the famous confrontation at Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). His witness, his 'great zeal for the Lord God of Hosts' and the faith of Israel – the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - turns violent, combining a willingness to kill with a willingness to die. You know the story; it has been a staple of Christian education since Sunday School. After a long drought, Elijah proposes a contest, to prove who the true God is: the priests and prophets of Ahab and Jezebel's cult are to call on their gods to end the drought, and he will call on The Lord to do so; as we all know, the devotees of Baal and Asherah spend the day calling on their gods with no result, as Elijah taunts them. Then at evening, Elijah builds an altar and calls on The Lord, who responds with a bolt of lightning that consumes his water-drenched offering. With this sign to back him up, he then orders that his opponents be slain – and the rains come. In response, Queen Jezebel orders his death, and Elijah must flee into the wilderness, where he encounters his God, not in the wind, or the earthquake, but in the murmuring sound, and is instructed to anoint Jehu as successor to Ahab, and Elisha as his own successor. (We'll get back to Jehu later.)

But this really picks up steam with the Maccabees; as it is less familiar than the story of Elijah, we read the beginning of their story from the apocrypha this morning. And that is the strand that the Old Testament bequeathed to its successors in Christianity – as quickly as it could seize the levers of power after the Constantinian compromise of 312 AD, and conduct its own persecutions – and in Islam, with our mutual history of Holy Wars, Crusades and jihad, and of persecutions within the faith: the Inquisitions, the internecine murders of Protestants and Roman Catholics, of Sunni and Shia, as heretics.

Let me suggest, in opposition to Elijah and the Maccabees and the Crusaders and jihadis and Inquisitors, and this whole strand of witnesses and martyrs who conceive their witness as the destruction of God's enemies, and the

John Browns, noble as their causes may be, that any God who is big enough to be worshipped, is big enough to take care of himself. A God who is big enough to really command our worship, is big enough to pull his own chestnuts out of the fire, and does not need our help, through our slaughters. And indeed, there is something in the story of Elijah, as it runs into the story of Jehu, which this whole succession of witnesses has missed: and that is that Jehu, although he carried out the commission given him by the prophet – although he carried out God's will in cleansing the land of Ahab and Jezebel and their corruption, religious and civil, was himself judged for that. Although his end was not as sticky as Jezebel's – she was thrown from an upper window, her body run over by war chariots and then eaten by dogs – he too is condemned by God, although his line will reign over Israel for four generations “because you have done well in carrying out what was right in My eyes” (I Kings 10:30). The fairly clear message is that the means chosen are not justified by the end, which is the fulfilment of the will of God.

I suppose the character of Jonah is also a witness to this. Jonah would have been more than glad to have fulfilled his mission to Nineveh – Bloody Nineveh – if he could have been sure that it would have meant its destruction. He hated God's enemies with a passion. Indeed, he hated them with a passion deeper than God's own. He would gladly have preached their destruction – and, I suspect, would have carried it out, if he had had the means. But when God is left to carry out his own will, it turns out his will is repentance, and their salvation. And we leave him, his story unresolved, wishing for his own death, sitting outside the realm of grace, while God's enemies find salvation in God's mercy and grace.

Time and time again – quite literally, for the same thought is found in Amos 5:21-24, Micah 6:6-8, Hosea 6:6, Jeremiah 7:22, Isaiah 1:11, Psalms 51:17 – through his prophets God calls on us for the devotion of our lives rather than sacrifice. Through the words of his prophets God says “Don't give Me any bull”, as I like to translate it: rather God's desire is expressed in key words such as obedience, loyalty, righteousness, justice: “Cease to do evil and learn to do right, pursue justice and champion the oppressed” (Is. 1:17), “Loyalty is my desire, not sacrifice, not whole offerings, but the knowledge of God” (Hosea 6:6), “Let justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24); “God has told you what is good. What is it that the Lord asks of you? Only to act justly, to love loyalty, to walk wisely before your God.” (Micah 6:6-8). These apply not only to the slaughter of animals as offerings, but to our sacrifice of ourselves – and more so to our sacrifice of the lives of others. Brothers and sisters, there is no cause worth killing for. There are causes worth dying for – but one had best be sure they are truly serious causes, or one's sacrifice merely looks pathetic. But ultimately, God desires our life – our living witness – not our death. The loyal pursuit of God's will for us, in a witness to Him, to his grace, to Jesus Christ, as he revealed

God's will for us, is the witness to which we are called; if that demands our life, as it did Martin Luther King's or Oscar Romero's, or the lives of so many other unsung Christians throughout the ages, from Stephen on to those who have died in Syria and Iraq in the past few weeks, so be it; but it is not to be sought. It is our living sacrifice that God wills. And most certainly not the deaths of others, no matter how certain – and mistaken – we may be in our judgement of them: for as Jonah well knew, however harsh his judgement over them, God's will for his enemies is their reconciliation and their salvation too.