

CAMPION DAY MASS - CAMPION HALL, OXFORD I DECEMBER 2023

Most Revd Bernard Longley

Anyone who loses his life for my sake, that man will save it.

It is both a joy and a privilege to join the community of Campion Hall this evening to celebrate Campion Day. I am very grateful to the Master, Fr Nick, and to the Students and Fellows for inviting me, together with all your other guests to be part of this year's celebration. Alongside your patron, St Edmund Campion, we also commemorate today St Robert Southwell and the other martyrs of the Jesuit English Province and Mission.

The commemoration of a martyr weaves together the contrasting themes of suffering and triumph. In St Edmund's life we see his struggle, in an age of religious upheaval, to find and live by the truth, so that others might follow his example – and we recognise its resolution and the inner peace that blandishments and the threat of torture and death could not undermine. We clearly hear an echo of the paradox in Our Lord's teaching that *anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, that man will save it.*

In this city, throughout the turbulence of the sixteenth century, Protestants and Catholics alike were familiar with the message of St Luke's Gospel, to those who would be followers of Christ, to take up their cross every day. Those who were martyred on either side of the religious divide were ready to sacrifice their lives rather than abandon not just their intellectual convictions but the revealed truth as they believed they had received it.

Pope Francis has urged us to re-assess our confessional understandings of martyrdom. Shortly after the twenty-one Coptic martyrs were brutally murdered in Libya in 2015 because they were Christians, the Holy Father met the Moderator of the Church of Scotland and together they lamented this brutality *in the land of Jesus*. Pope Francis said:

The blood of our Christian brothers and sisters is a testimony which cries out to be heard. It makes no difference whether they be Catholics, Orthodox, Copts or Protestants. They are Christians! Their blood is one and the same. Their blood confesses Christ. As we recall these brothers who died only because they confessed Christ, I ask that we encourage each another to go forward with this ecumenism which is giving us strength, the ecumenism of blood. The martyrs belong to all Christians.

Admittedly, it is more of a challenge to view the Reformation martyrs through this lens – but more recent ecumenical insights have helped us to do so. Receptive ecumenism, refined through the work of Professor Paul Murray at the University of Durham, has challenged us to receive what is celebrated and treasured by other Christians to make up for what may be lacking in the expression of our own Church's faith. The witness and prayers of the martyrs can bring us together to face and seek to alleviate the equally complex reality of contemporary suffering in our world.

As the week-long ceasefire in Gaza comes to an end we need our leaders and politicians to find lasting and just settlements for the peaceful co-existence of Israelis and Palestinians alike. Last month the Birmingham Faith Leaders Group met in the city at Singers Hill Synagogue. We said: *Today, as we struggle to find words to adequately respond to the events in Israel and Gaza, we come together again as a visible expression of our friendship and solidarity. We are appalled by the horrific actions of Hamas and their unspeakable brutality, and by the brutal plight of ordinary civilians caught up in the ensuing siege and bombardment of Gaza...our prayers become yet more fervent for urgent humanitarian relief and for peace-building at an extremely volatile time.*

As the war in Ukraine slowly unfolds and the sufferings of the civilian population continue, I found the prayers for peace, offered by the Russian Orthodox Parish of St Nicholas here in Ferry Road, profoundly moving. In a statement on the parish website Archpriest Fr Stephen Platt has written: *Our community along with the rest of the world has been horrified by the ongoing tragic and senseless war in Ukraine. An ocean of destruction, suffering, and hatred has been unleashed since the Russian invasion of Ukraine... we pray for the cessation of bloodshed, a complete restoration of peace, the well-being of the people of Ukraine and Russia and for Christian love to reign over all God's people.*

And today is World Aids Day when we remember the thirty-eight million people worldwide who continue to live with HIV. We know that, despite medical advances, many have suffered the stigma of AIDS, either directly or through the prolonged illness and death of a loved one. The courage of the martyrs can help us to recognise and compensate for the impact of prejudice and misunderstanding wherever it stifles love and compassion.

It is tempting to imagine how St Edmund Campion would have responded to these and the other great problems that face us today, including the climate issues being addressed in Dubai by Cop28. He would surely have brought his unswerving conviction that the presence of Christ must be sought within all these situations and that He alone has the power to act in men and women of good will to find true, just and lasting solutions.

If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself. By the decisions he took St Edmund demonstrated that he was ready to lose much that the world considered highly desirable – the favour of the Crown, preferment and high office in the Church of England, release from imprisonment and torture, and even earthly life itself – but he forsook all these for the true peace of mind that faithfulness to Christ and commitment to the unity of His Church could bring.

*St Edmund Campion and Jesuit Martyrs of the English Province and Mission:
Pray for us.*