

Pentecost 15, Sunday 5th September 2021

Prov 22: 1-2, 8-9, 22-23	Psalm 125	James 2: 1-10, 14-17	Mark 7: 24-37
--------------------------	-----------	----------------------	---------------

On Thursday this past week, 2nd September, the Anglican Church of Australia commemorated New Guinea Martyrs Day. This is the annual commemoration of 12 people who were serving in the Anglican church in Papua and New Guinea (PNG) when the events of Second World War caught up with them, particularly the Japanese invasion of PNG.

They were teachers, nurses, priests, lay workers and evangelists. Most were either Australian or English but two were Papuans – Lucien Tapiedi, and Leslie Gariardi. You may have seen the statue of Lucien Tapiedi that features among the 10 statues of 20th Century Martyrs at Westminster Abbey.

These 12 are called martyrs because they were killed in 1942 Or '43 in the course of their mission service either by Japanese forces or local Papua New Guineans. Information is understandably uncertain in parts with some narratives stating that all of them were offered the opportunity to travel to safety before the Japanese arrived, but they chose to stay; while another said some were ordered to stay at their posts by church authorities.

One martyr's story caught my attention in particular because she is remembered at St Cuthbert's in Prospect as she lived just around the corner from the church. **Lilla Lashmar** had been a teacher and missionary with the Australian Board of Inland Missions for several years before she was captured and beheaded by Japanese soldiers on September 4th, 1942.

St Cuthbert's has a memorial to her that includes a stained-glass window and a bamboo cross, which was a gift from the Anglican Church of Japan in contrition and recognition of Australian Anglicans martyred by Japanese soldiers.

Lilla Lashmar was a remarkable woman, who has given me pause for thought and much deep self-reflection this week, not unlike some of the characters in today's Gospel passage.

First, the Syrophenician woman, a Gentile, whose fierce determination to see her daughter healed sees her engage in a verbal sparring match with the strange, itinerant preacher-teacher man shaking up the Jewish establishment. What's more, she'd have had to find him in the first place, keeping her ear to the local grapevine as the text records that he didn't want to offend people needlessly, so tried to keep his presence secret.

This is a tad ironical as it was unlikely to go unnoticed since he was breaking with Jewish tradition that said a faithful Jew would have nothing to do with Gentiles and would never even enter a Gentile's house.

Jesus seems to discourage the woman from her quest, reminding her that the children, (the Jewish people) get priority over the little dogs or Gentiles like her.

In those days, Jews often called Gentiles by the derogatory term *dogs*, which to the Greeks had the same objectionable connotations as today's use of the term for a female dog. However, Jesus did not use the normal word for *dogs*, instead softening the term into *little dogs*, taking the sting out of it, essentially, reminding the woman of her place as a Gentile, yet not wanting to push her away completely. In Greek, diminutives are characteristically affectionate.

The woman responds with remarkable grace, not debating the insulting language used but accepting her lower status and pressing on with her intense purpose: To see her daughter healed.

An often-quoted definition of love, used particularly at weddings, but descriptive also of the servant or sacrificial love that we are told is our calling, is this: *The willingness to put the needs of another person above our own.*

I'd say that's a fair description of this unnamed Gentile mother.

Pondering on this passage during the week I have been powerfully struck by her single-minded similarity to Lilla Lashmar: Almost fanatical perseverance and commitment to a cause; for the Syrophenician woman that is the well-being of her unnamed daughter.

And then there are the also-unnamed "they" who bring the deaf man with a speech impediment to Jesus and "beg" him to touch their companion.

Interesting people these, who are they? Friends, family who care about the man enough to do something about his condition, in fact the only thing they can do?

Perhaps acquaintances tired of being harassed by this annoying beggar, so keen for him to be healed so they don't have to be troubled by him anymore, or perhaps by their consciences?

Interesting language the text uses too. There's no request for healing as with the woman before, just begging for a touch. Apparently, such is their belief in this preacher-man, or perhaps in his reputation, that they believe a touch is all it will take. "They" are rewarded, and such is their joy that they won't stop talking about the miraculous healing, no matter how much the Teacher tells them to: "... the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it."

So, what do a 20th Century martyr and some unnamed characters from first Century Israel have in common?

Put simply: Love and faith.

However, I want to frame this differently and put to you the questions I have been asking myself this week:

To what or to whom are you committed with the same kind of tenacity and strength that the Gentile woman shows in her motherlove for her daughter?

Then,

In what, or in whom, do you trust as firmly as the deaf man's companions believe in the preacher-man that you would be willing to take the kind of risk that they do?

And finally,

For what, or for whom would you be willing to die?

References

Catholic.net

abmission.org

adelaideguardian.com

blueletterbible.com: David Guzik

Eating with the Bridegroom, John Shea, 2005, Liturgical Press

Sunday and Holy Day Liturgies, Cycle B, Flor McCarthy SDB, 1984, Dominican Publications