

**Waiapu Anglican Cathedral of St John the Evangelist, Napier**

*Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2013 – the Martyrs of Uganda*

**Charity Norman**

You may be wondering what I am doing up here, in my red frock, talking to you in the slot generally occupied by proper clergy with proper clergyish things to say.

If so, you are in good company, because the question “what am I doing here?” is one I regularly ask myself. But today, I’m not quite empty handed. I’ve got some terrific stories to share with you - all the better for being true.

Now, I believe it is traditional on these occasions for the person standing in this lofty witness box to refer to the Gospel reading. Today’s was a story – the parable of those tenants who didn’t want to pay their dues. The Landlord sent one servant after another, asking for them to pay. Those servants had a terrible time. Violence escalated. Some of them were killed. Finally the Landlord sent his own son, but he too was murdered. So – understandably - the Landlord destroyed the tenants and gave the vineyard to somebody else.

We could debate for hours about the theology of this, and about precisely what the vineyard and its owner and the cornerstone meant to Jesus’ audience in first century Palestine.

But we’re not going to do that, because I want to focus on those servants. They remind me of the red-shirted anonymous expendables of Star Trek. The red-shirts were the real heroes of Star Trek, don’t you think? They beamed down to some hostile planet with Captain Kirk and Mr Spock, and they must have known that their life expectancy was about four minutes. But never, ever did they refuse to go. Those servants of the Landlord, too, are heroic. They have a message to carry, and they carry it all the way to their deaths.

Tomorrow – 3<sup>rd</sup> June - is the day that the church remembers a group of servants who did just that: the Ugandan martyrs.

To visit the first martyrs, we must travel back to the earliest years of Christianity in Uganda. So forget the pure lines of this cathedral and the fact that you’re a bit chilly right now, and imagine instead the dripping, impenetrable forests and parched savannahs of East Africa in the 1870s.

Christianity had just arrived in Buganda, part of what is now Uganda – that gloriously beautiful, landlocked country. The Anglican CMS had sent some, and The Catholic White fathers were there too. The king, or Kabaka, of Buganda was a man called Mutesa. He had a lot of royal pages – some of them very young boys. Many of these boys were drawn to the message of Jesus Christ, and were baptised.

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Then Mutesa died, and that's when the trouble began. He was succeeded by his son Mwanga. Mwanga saw a link between Christianity and the colonial powers which had begun to tussle over the region. He did have political problems. From now on, to be a Christian was to be disloyal to the king – and that was extremely dangerous.

His first move, in January 1885, was to arrest three Christian page boys and burn them to death. The youngest one – Yusufu – was only 11. Eyewitnesses reported that though their parents wept and the British missionaries pleaded for their lives, the boys were calm, and died singing hymns.

It is an extraordinary fact that after this atrocity, the number of baptisms increased. Over the next two years, many young men met the same fate – but still more spread the word.

The tornado reached its height in late May, 1886. Mwanga came home unexpectedly from a hippo hunt to find almost all his pages studying the Bible. He rounded them up and ordered them to separate into two: those who followed Christ, and those who followed Mwanga. And there are no prizes for guessing what would happen if they followed Christ.

We have an account of what happened, because some missionaries were unwilling witnesses. 26 – that's almost all – of the men and boys chose Christ. Their leader was a man called Charles Lwanga. Charles was powerful at court; his life could have been long and comfortable, but he chose another path.

It took several days to collect enough firewood to burn so many people. They were shackled together and had to hobble 22 miles to the site of their own execution at a village called Namagongo. It's harrowing to imagine this hellish march – but the 26 actually sang hymns as they walked – especially one particular hymn which you will hear about later.

They were executed on 3<sup>rd</sup> June. As the flames rose, their voices could be heard praying and encouraging each other. The last words of a boy called Kizito – who was 14 – were, "Goodbye friends, we are on our way."

Mwanga's violence backfired on him, big-time, because the example of the martyrs inspired many others. Within a few years, Christianity had exploded across Buganda. A shrine now stands at Namagongo, and June 3<sup>rd</sup> is to this day a public holiday in Uganda. Those martyrs who were Catholic were later canonised. Today almost 90 percent of Uganda's population identify themselves as Christian.

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So those servants of the Landlord managed to deliver their message, after all.

And now – briefly- let's drag our imaginations away from the burning skies of Africa. Conjure instead a misty morning in 1950s Britain, at the tiny station of Teeston Halt, in Kent. A young couple is waiting for a train to take them to the South Coast. He's a soldier-turned-barrister-turned clergyman, and she is a classicist. In a pram lies their baby son. Half of their worldly possessions are in there too. There's hardly room for the baby.

After a long sea journey, our CMS mission partners – Bill and Beryl - arrived at Buwalasi Theological college, in the lush foothills of Mount Elgon in Eastern Uganda.

On one of their first nights there, Beryl met a snake on their verandah, nearly stepping on it in the flickering light of a kerosene lamp. When she told Bill about this encounter, he laughed merrily. It was probably the right attitude.

Buwalasi was their home for the next decade, and I truly think it was the happiest time of their lives. He worked in the college while she taught New Testament Greek to ordinands as well as helping in the dispensary. In her spare time she gave birth to six more children, which is pretty excessive – but I cannot complain, because the seventh – and last - was me.

I was too young to remember, but my family tell me that every Easter morning, long, long before the sun came up, they would hear the voices of people singing as they made their way up Buwalasi hill in the pre-dawn dark – rich voices, raised in the glorious natural harmonies with which they seemed to have been born. They gathered others from the villages as they walked, and everyone came together at the church, singing as the African sun rose above Mount Elgon and dissolved the mists that clung to its slopes. It was magical - an Easter vigil like no other – colourful and vibrant and deep-rooted. It seems that the light that was carried by those boy martyrs, in the 1880s, still burned brightly.

One of the ordinands who helped my parents to settle in, and remained a good friend over the years, was a man called Janani Luwum.

Which brings me to our last martyr.

Janani was born in 1922 on the plains of Northern Uganda. Home was a group of grass-roofed huts, and as a child his job was to herd goats. He had a born-again experience in his 20s, and gave up teaching to enter the church. His training took him – and his wife and children - to Buwalasi.

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My father remembers Janani as strong, kindly, gentle, competent, clever, knowledgeable, courteous, a man of good judgement. He learned NT Greek from my mother, and my father set his Church History paper – he scored 88 percent, possibly more than I have ever scored in any exam ever. He stayed with my grandparents in Kent when studying in England. He took over as principal of Buwalasi college when my family left.

Janani's first parish was in Northern Uganda. It was vast, and he had to get around it on a bicycle. A group of delinquent boys gave trouble, and finally burned the church to the ground. Janani refused to be angry, and his forgiveness paid off – one of those boys later became Bishop of Northern Uganda.

Last Friday, I phoned one of my sisters, Julia, to say bon voyage as she's about to travel to the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is quite volatile at the moment. At the same time, her daughter will be in Northern Uganda. But I digress. I mentioned in passing that I was going to be speaking about Janani Luwum. She fell silent. Minutes after the call had ended, I was surprised to find an email from her.

And here's what she said.

"Janani not only baby-sat us, but was recognisable, to my 9-year old brain, as a saint on this earth."

She went on to describe a time when, as a child, she was very unhappy.

"We were packing to leave Uganda, and crates had to have names and addresses painted on using stencils and red paint. I was sent to the far end of the house with a paint pot. Janani came and sat beside me, silently helping. Just having him there, not talking, or discussing, or making a noise, made all the difference to me.

Janani was one of those people whose presence permeates a space, and makes you feel better, as if they are hot-wired to heaven.

It reminds me of the Celtic concept of a "thin place", a gauzy bit of firmament which allows a glimpse of the glory of God to shine through."

I am always first in line to criticise when a sermon is too long. So I'd better practice what I preach, and fast forward a few years.

After many adventures Janani Luwum was made Bishop of Northern Uganda; and in 1974 he became Archbishop of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Boga-Zaire.

Wikipedia – that fountain of all knowledge - describes him as "one of the most influential leaders of the modern church in Africa".

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By that time, General Idi Amin had staged a coup d'état and seized control. And the terror had begun.

Idi Amin is of course notorious for being one of the bloodiest dictators of the 20th century, responsible for the torture and murder of about 300,000 people.

The news coming out of Uganda was horrifying at this time. I remember our family listening in silence to accounts of the latest atrocities, reported on BBC radio 4. My father's face was in his hands.

Archbishop Janani Luwum was one of the few who dared to stand up to the regime. He insisted on seeing Amin himself many times, in person, trying to persuade him to turn back. He bravely criticized Amin publicly, and internationally. Yet he also said: "We must love the president. We must pray for him. He is a child of God."

People came to Janani for help, when their husband or son had been picked up by the army. He would jump into his car and go to the dreaded State Research Bureau – chilling name. Sometimes he saved their lives. Sometimes he was too late.

It's difficult even to imagine such courage, or such love, or such faith. Janani knew very well that his interference enraged Amin, and that those who enraged Amin died in horrible ways. And I do mean horrible ways. He knew that his own turn would come.

On 16<sup>th</sup> February 1977, Janani and two cabinet ministers – both committed Christians – were arrested. As he was taken away, his friends tried to follow but were pushed back. Janani turned, looked at them and smiled. "Don't be afraid," he said. "I can see the hand of the Lord in this."

The next morning the government put out a press release, claiming that Archbishop Janani Luwum had been killed in a motor accident.

But his body was riddled with bullets – through the chest, and through the mouth. So it was a funny kind of motor accident.

Eyewitnesses said that that he had been beaten by his captors, but that he was praying aloud for them when they shot him.

His statue stands at the doors of Westminster Abbey as one of the Twentieth Century martyrs.

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His secretary, Margaret Ford, in her book “Janani. The Making of a martyr,” describes how the regime tried to hide Janani’s body, and even to stop people from mourning this man who had been like a father to them - but the attempt backfired, just as Mwanga’s repression had, in the 1880s.

Margaret writes:

“In Uganda that Sunday morning, the radio told us that there would be no special prayers about the dead Archbishop. But this announcement did not deter thousands of people from attending Matins in Namirembe cathedral. Tears flowed. A group of us made our way up the hill to join the thousands. Someone made room for us on a bench outside. As the service came to its end, the procession moved slowly out, followed by the congregation. No one dispersed. Everybody stood as though they were waiting for something to happen, for someone to say something. Then suddenly voices began to sing, over and over again, the hymn sung by the first Ugandan Martyrs, until Namirembe Hill resounded with song.

*Daily, daily, sing the praises*

*Of the city God hath made;*

*In the beautiful field of Eden*

*Its foundation-stones are laid.”*

So. It seems to me that the Ugandan martyrs are not mere red-shirted, anonymous expendables. Far from it. They are utterly extraordinary. They carried their message of faith, and they passed it on. It’s a flame that’s still burning in Africa today, and it brings light to us even here, in our relatively untroubled corner of the Pacific.

Perhaps they have indeed made a thin place in the firmament, through which the rest of us - if we look very, *very* carefully - may catch a glimpse of the glory of God.

Amen.