

# Saints and martyrs of Africa

Evensong sermon February 12<sup>th</sup> 2017 by the Rev Derek Lightbourne

Keynote Bible passage: Isaiah 61.4 – 9

From the time of my childhood I remember reading the Jungle Doctor stories, of a missionary doctor Paul White bringing the gospel to 'darkest Africa' and treating local people for their sicknesses and disease, from 1938. I loved reading dramatic stories like that of David Livingstone who toughed it out encountering untold adversity – hostile country, hostile creatures, hostile tribes and yet he and others carried on to bring the gospel. With my learning the organ I was also in admiration of Albert Schweitzer, a remarkable organist, theologian, doctor and missionary in West Africa. This sermon is the first in the Evensong series themed 'A living spring – drawing inspiration from our Anglican tradition.' Thus first in our living spring is the contribution of African Christianity and especially as we have regard for Saints and Martyrs of Africa.

1) As we consider it in historical context I believe one can trace three phases of the gospel coming to Africa and its influence on our faith and belief. The first and earliest might be regarded as *the place of tradition*.

It is important to note the gospel came to Africa in very early days of the Christian endeavour. Indeed Jesus himself spent a time in Africa in Egypt in order to flee from King Herod. Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross for Jesus was likely an African. Cyrene was where there was a sizeable Jewish colony in what is now Libya.

With the Roman Empire having spread round the fringes of north Africa there were a number of Christian communities. Some significant early leaders in the church were from settlements in Africa. These included Augustine, Cyprian and Tertullian. Perpetua and her companions were martyred in a persecution in Carthage in North Africa in 203. Thus in the days before the rise and spread of Islam in the middle ages Christians were ministering and spreading the gospel in those earliest times.

Changes there will always be, towards the contemporary. Yet I'm mindful of the desire in these days to retain historic sites, to finding more about our past, and treasures that are to be found. In Africa there is the Coptic church. Tradition has it that the Coptic Orthodox church was founded in Alexandria in Egypt by St Mark in the middle of the first century. Despite the persecution, first in the Roman Empire and then from Islam it has continued and today membership worldwide numbers in the millions. Their worship is very like other orthodox worship tradition – very ornate and what we would describe as traditional worship. Our own church wrestles with tradition and contemporary – as we see in our own context. My hope is that the traditional continues, not as a historical antiquity but as a way in which God can be worshipped and we can know Divine presence in music, reading and prayer.

2) After those early years in Africa came a second wave of the gospel. Exploration by European nations went hand in hand with the gospel along with search for riches, and trade and slavery. So it was the Catholics especially the Spanish preached the gospel in West Africa in the 1700's. For the Protestants, we know it as the *modern missionary movement*, although it has been present for some 200 years. East and Central Africa was opened up to the gospel went as missionaries and

explorers including David Livingstone. They faced great hardships in travel, the opposition of Arab slave traders and endemic diseases. Bishop Hannington in Uganda suffered a martyr's death, as did many of the first Ugandan Christians, including the boy martyrs who rather than deny their newly found Saviour, were willing to be put into the fire.

The Anglican Church Missionary Society has especially been active in countries across central Africa such as Tanzania. For years New Zealand has sent out missionaries, teachers, medical specialists and farmers to help with contemporary methods. Evangelisation has been extraordinarily successful with there now being millions who are Anglican. As the church in Africa has become more independent there's been change from 'missionaries' to those who go being *mission partners*. While it is not big in numbers there also been some who've come to New Zealand. They have a story to tell, of great faith, of remarkable healings happening, and suffering under continuing persecution.

What we can draw from these folk and these times is the importance of *faith in God working*. Perhaps it is due to lack of adequate and enough medical help, to poverty and a deep willingness to trust in God who provides. It is noteworthy much of the evangelisation and leadership has for many years been in the hands of African leaders. A tribute to Bishop Festo Kivengere notes how he and others witnessed in the west to the challenge of simple faith, radical discipleship and sacrificial service: ingredients for the rapid growth of the church in Africa. For me, I'm a long way from that, but recognise how important to have faith and trust in God and the call to witness as opportunity presents.

3) Now to a 3<sup>rd</sup> aspect and issues of our own day. Our church has a mission face to *work against injustice* wherever and however it is encountered. In Africa for some this has meant standing up to wrongs in their own countries, and the persecution by imprisonment, torture and death by the leaders and army. One might recall the witness of Archbishop Janani Luwum in Uganda. He stood up to President Idi Amin during a reign of terror in the 1970's. The archbishop protested about the many arbitrary deaths and abuse of human rights and the general reign of terror and for that he was arrested and shot along with two government ministers in 1977. With great courage he had carried a personal protest to the President on behalf of the church of Uganda. We are mindful of others also who have suffered because of their faith and conviction in our own day, thinking of Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu protesting the injustice of apartheid. New Zealanders John Osmer and Michael Lapsley were also caught and wounded in the same struggle.

Today the church in Nigeria is under persecution and churches are regularly burned down. The latest atrocities by Boko Haram are a case in point. Those who convert to Christianity are often chastised and alienated from their own families. Yet the gospel needs to continue to speak to people and hence our support for the likes of Gill Alcorn helping to convey the message. I'm mindful of St Paul's 'how are they to hear with out someone to proclaim Christ.' There are also economic needs as the effect of climate change brings more serious droughts and more floods – albeit in different parts of the African continent. Sadly exploitation continues as it did in those earlier days of exploration and discovery. Animals and vegetation are affected, and health issues and famine continue beset many countries. I'm sure we are under judgment for our little action helping so the hungry may be fed. Ethnic cleansing and violence have been aspects in that continent, and yet international

organisations seem powerless to do much about it. How to begin to help when the problem is so huge?

Living springs – the church in Africa includes many members of our own denomination. Their witness in the past and present are an example for us. As mentioned first, there is the importance of tradition in who we are and what brings us in common with those who have gone before us. We also from time are placed in situations of witnessing to our faith. Certainly it is not in the extreme of many African brothers and sisters. We can be open to having faith in God meeting our needs along with our neighbour. And as we seek to make the world a better place for all peoples we are able to support those in other countries through agencies of our own church.