

Nailing one's colours to the mast

Khrushchev was one of better known leaders of Communist Russia during the Cold War. During one of his formal addresses to the communist faithful he proceeded to denounce his predecessor, Stalin, for crimes committed against the Russian people. Half way through the address a loud voice came from the audience: 'Where were you, Mr Khrushchev, when all these atrocities were taking place?' There was a stony silence. Khrushchev then said, "Can the man who said that please stand up" There wasn't a stir – you could have heard a pin drop. He repeated it but still no one moved. Khrushchev continued, "Now you know comrade where I was when all these atrocities were taking place"

Unlike the man in the audience, as catholic Christians, we must not hide our identity when our faith is questioned or worse, disowned, by certain elements of present day society. Jesus said in today's gospel, "when your faith is challenged, that will be your opportunity to bear witness". Even among family or friends when relationships become a bit strained because of our faith, we need to stand firm.

In this context we call on the martyrs of England and Wales to pray for us. In our bid these days to be more ecumenically appealing there is a tendency to skim over the self-sacrifice of those who gave their lives for the Catholic faith in this country and see it as the product of a less enlightened, more barbaric age. Last Sunday we remembered those who fell in the world and regional wars which, of course must never be forgotten, but, as Catholics, neither should we forget those who freely sacrificed their lives for the faith in this country. People like Margaret Clitheroe, a convert to Catholicism, mother of three, who was persuaded by her family and friends to abjure her faith but pointedly refused.

It wouldn't be right if knowledge of the country's martyrs were withheld from our school children especially those at secondary level. These brave men and women faced death rather than renounce their Catholic faith, Jesus foretold as much in today's gospel. But it did not just happen in this country or centuries ago for that matter. A few years ago the last Pope canonised over 400 people who died for the faith during the Spanish Civil War of the 1930's. Last year there were at least 300 people in different parts of the world who died as a result of being Catholics.

Not far from here, about nine miles out the road in Derbyshire, there is the shrine to the Padley martyrs. These priests gave their lives for the Catholic faith during the Elizabethan era. It is interesting to note, however, that one of them, Nicholas Garlicky, was betrayed by his own uncle. This re-echoes the words of Jesus: "you will be betrayed even by relations and friends". In return the uncle was given a sizeable portion of monastic land which his decedents hold to this day.

The dissolution of the monasteries after 1536 provided rich pickings for those who were well placed to get their hands on some of the monastery land which was the

most developed and best farmed in the country. At the time of the Reformation people didn't just suddenly develop an appetite for the new religion – the promise of land was also a driving force behind its establishment. People were even prepared to betray their families to be on the 'land list'. Remember Judas, one of the apostles betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Have we ever compromised our spiritual values for the sake of material gain?

Of all the saints in the Church's calendar, after Our Lady, the martyrs hold pride of place. As the Year of faith draws to a close may we resolve more earnestly to emulate their courage and resilience in our times as they did in theirs?

QUESTIONS

- 1. Have Christians generally been 'shrinking violets' especially when their faith is tested or trivialised or not taken seriously by the secular world. Discuss*
- 2. Is there a tendency by many to play down the self-sacrifice of the martyrs of England and Wales, for the sake of being more 'ecumenically correct'? Discuss*
- 3. Who benefited most from the dissolution of the monasteries (800 of them) under Henry V¹¹¹ between 1535 – 1541?*
- 4. How generally do parents feel when their children or other members of the family stray from their catholic faith and rarely go to Mass? Is it just part of growing up or is there a deeper malaise going on in our society which needs addressing by the church? Discuss*