

### 33 C

*Khrushchev was a well-known communist leader during the Cold War. During one of his formal addresses to the Party faithful he proceeded to denounce his predecessor, Stalin, for crimes committed against his own people. Half way through the address a voice from nowhere piped up from the audience: 'Where were you, Mr Khrushchev, when all these atrocities were taking place?' There was a stony silence. Khrushchev then said, "Would the man who said that please identify himself". No one moved – you could have heard a pin drop. Khrushchev continued, "Now you know comrade where I was when all these atrocities were taking place"*

As catholic Christians, we must not hide our identity when our faith is challenged or worse, disowned, by non-believers. Jesus said in today's gospel, "when your faith is tested, that will be your opportunity to bear witness".

In our bid these days to be more ecumenically sensitive there is a tendency to skim over the self-sacrifice of those who gave their lives for the Catholic faith in this country and explain it away as the product of a less enlightened, more barbaric age. Of course protestant martyrs also abound during this period. 183 English Catholics were put to death between 1577 and 1603 but altogether, some 600 Catholics died in the religious persecutions of the 16th and 17th centuries. Today we remember those who lost their lives in war defending their country, but as Catholics, we also remember those men and women who gave their lives for their faith in this country. People like Margaret Clitheroe, a convert to Catholicism, mother of three, who was sweet-talked to renounce her faith but stood firm to the end.

But it's not just confined to the Middle Ages. When he was in office, Pope Benedict canonised over 400 people who died for their faith during the Spanish Civil War of the 1930's. And hundreds of people every year worldwide pay the ultimate price for their Christian beliefs.

Not far from here there is the shrine to the Padley martyrs. Fathers Nicholas Garlick and Robert Ludlam gave their lives in defence of the Catholic priesthood and the Mass during those turbulent times. We're

told they were betrayed by a family member. This re-echoes the words of Jesus: "you will be betrayed even by relations and friends".

The dissolution of the monasteries, roughly 900 of them, after 1536 meant that huge swathes of monastic land became rich pickings for those who stood to gain. This land was the most developed and best farmed in the country. However, the promise of land was given to some who exchanged information on the whereabouts of catholic priests in hiding or information on the whereabouts of very courageous laypeople who lent their homes for the celebration of Mass. People even grassed on their own kit and kin in exchange for land. Let's not forget that Jesus himself was betrayed by one of his own inner circle for thirty pieces of silver.

*Of all the saints in the Church's calendar, after Our Lady, the martyrs hold pride of place. We're not likely to be asked to shed our blood for our faith but opportunities will come our way in our everyday lives to stand up for Christ and his teaching. The Lord's words ring clear: 'the one who declares himself/herself for me in the presence of men, I will declare myself for him in the presence of my Father in heaven'.*