

Feast of the New Guinea Martyrs September 1 2013

Papua New Guinea is a place that gets into the blood stream. Once there, always there. I'd prefer not to compare it with malaria, which also remains in my bloodstream from my days there, but rather with a melody, or a snatch of poetry, that constantly recurs like a thread through life. A place of deep encounters.

And sometimes, even for its own inhabitants, a place that is hard to read.

One of Australia's greatest poets, James McAuley, spent time there, time that was very formative for him. He wrote:

“There the great island lies, with its archaic bird-reptile shape. The smoking mountains speak low thunder, the earth shakes lightly, the sun glares down on the impenetrable dark-green mantle of forest with its baroque folds, the cloud-shadows pass over the green, a white cockatoo rises off the tree tops like a torn scrap of paper, like an unread message...”

Many Australians used to know PNG, or had relatives or close friends, who knew it and probably obsessed a bit about it. That's all changed. It's now another “unknown.” Not much read. But not, I suggest despite the poetic truths of McAuley's words, not unreadable, or unknowable.

Indeed, our failure to comprehend the place has compounded our widespread perplexity at the asylum seeker deal struck just a few weeks ago – which seems to me an eternity, having written dozens of stories on the subject since then.

Some folk were quick to judge, however, saying with all the authority of ignorance that PNG's Christians would be enraged to receive a few hundred – or perhaps a few thousand – Muslims, or that the scheme's success depended on the prospect that even people fleeing their own lands, would be even more scared enough by the prospect of landing up in PNG that they would swiftly turn round and return home.

In fact, PNG's Prime Minister Peter O'Neill has stressed that yes, there are material gains for his country from the arrangement, but that at its core he perceives it as a deal struck to help out Australia, which he has described as a friend in need.

This is a place in the relationship where we've been before. In rather more desperate days, when inadequately trained young rookie soldiers and often older militia members, were left to halt the Japanese advance over the forbidding Owen Stanley Range to Port Moresby and then, presumably, beyond, to what people there still call today Down South. The famous Fuzzie Wuzzie Angels, PNG's own volunteers, saving the lives of countless of our young countrymen on the Kokoda Track.

Near Kokoda itself is where we encounter our New Guinea Martyrs, our own especial heroes of today, and of every day.

Let's take our camera in close, in particular, on Vivian Redlich. He was born in 1905, in South Africa, and grew up in England, where his father was a rector. After training at Chichester theological college he was ordained, and came to Australia, serving five tumultuous years with the Bush Brotherhood in central Queensland, before heading up to the new frontier that was – and perhaps is – Papua New Guinea. He returned in July 1942 to his church at Sangara in Oro province (where these beautiful objects, including the tapa cloth, placed in the church this morning come from), near Mount Lamington, from recuperating from illness at Dogura, full of the joys of life – because he was freshly engaged to a nurse with the mission, May Hayman. May grew up in Adelaide, and was nicknamed Merry. But the Japanese were already landing.

On Saturday July 25 Fr Vivian gathered the community together and said (we know this because a government medical worker was present and later wrote an official report): "I am your missionary. I have come back to you to help you and I will remain with you as long as you will let me. Tomorrow is Sunday and I shall celebrate Holy Communion."

On the Monday, he wrote the following:

(from) *Somewhere in the Papuan Bush July 27th 1942*

My Dear Dad The war has busted up here. I got back from Dogura and ran right into it, and am now somewhere in my parish hoping to carry on, tho' my people are horribly scared. No news of May, and I am cut off from contacting her - my staff O.K. so far, but in another spot.

I'm trying to stick whatever happens. If I don't come out of it, just rest content that I have tried to do my job faithfully. Last chance of getting word out: so forgive brevity.

God Bless you all, Vivian

Bishop Philip Strong – who had asked the missionaries to stay at their posts – described Fr Vivian as “that happy, youthful, gifted, gallant soul.” This letter to his dad was his last message. Soon after, he was killed – it now appears, by some local Orokaivan warriors attempting to curry favour with the new power in PNG – Japan. May was bayoneted to death by a Japanese soldier at around the same time.

Fr Vivian’s farewell message can be seen today on display in St Paul's Cathedral in London.

It springs instantly to my mind every PNG Martyrs Day, because I worked for about a decade with Archbishop David Hand in Port Moresby, and Fr Vivian’s story had a deep impact on him, and was a prime motivating factor pulling him to help rebuild the church community there after the war, arriving in 1946.

To my astonishment, after I had spoken 3 years ago at a Martyrs Day ABM event in Sydney, a tall and effervescent bloke bowled up to me and said “Thanks for the kind words about my brother.” This was Fr Vivian's half brother Pat Redlich, now living in Sydney. A year ago completed an excellent book, *My Brother Vivian*, which you can buy at St Peter's Eastern Hill Bookroom or via www.mybrothervivian.com

I recall strongly, accompanying a Japanese Bishop, John Okubo, who was the first representative of his church to travel to those scenes of martyrdom. I walked with him on the beach at Buna where Japanese soldiers beheaded several missionaries and others. He had himself been imprisoned during the war for his outspoken pacifism. I witnessed the bishop's tears that day.

Our readings for today speak fully of the spiritual battles and triumphs swirling around these most intense events. They are appropriately hard readings but of course they also tell of ultimate grace and salvation.

Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord, says the psalmist.

Do not fear, do not let your hands hang limp, says the writer of Zephaniah. "The Lord your God is with you."

Paul affirms wonderfully in the crucial 8th chapter of his letter to the Romans, in one of the great poetic passages of scripture, that: "neither death nor life, neither angels or demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

And Jesus Himself says in John's gospel: "Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; where I am, my servant also will be."

He does not of course say: Whoever serves me will become rich and gather coteries of fervent supporters that confirm my approval. For ours is not a gospel of success. We are not here to relax in a cosy kingdom of God, to celebrate a church, in PNG or here, built on prosperity, on burgeoning crowds of instant adherents, on applause from the like-minded, and on unshaded happiness.

John paints Jesus' death as the climax of history, and the beginning of universal mission and of hope. This is not a message so remote from our own experience. Life and fruitfulness come from self giving. That's something, for instance, that those of us who are parents understand well – and all of us, who are also children. The truth is sometimes painful, but avoiding it amounts to a denial, as Peter discovered so devastatingly as the events in Jerusalem rapidly unravelled, everything - as Peter would naturally have seen it - getting out of hand, spinning out of control. Which is how Fr Vivian's world too must have seemed.

The other side of the coin from sacrifice is incorporation, gathering together into the life of the church, into the life of God. The material poverty of living in PNG – as missionaries or as members of the church there in other ways - means little in contrast with the richness, the fun, the joy, the loss of self, in daily life, in brotherhood and sisterhood, in true mutual acceptance.

Martyrs Day, or Witnesses Day, comes just a fortnight before that other great occasion for placing Papua New Guinea closer to our hearts: its Independence Day, September 16.

So we think at this time of sacrifice and of new birth. Of fellowship, of troubles, of love, human and divine. Of friends and neighbours, including Papua New Guineans, only a canoe ride away but it so often seems a world apart.

Today is a time to close that gap, as we think about a core element of the faith we share, in PNG and here.

The PNG PM Peter O'Neill is a man of mixed race, who has told me of his pride in both his parents - his mother from PNG's Southern Highlands, and his father, a patrol officer then magistrate who came from Williamstown just across the bay here, and devoted his life to PNG.

He told me soon after being elected by a record number of MPs a year ago: "A lot of our people lost hope and trust that we leaders were capable of delivering. But now there is a generational change in the leadership.

"It's a time to hope again."

As corruption ate away at government services and political credibility, and crime grew, the people of PNG turned to their churches for comfort, for support, and of course for salvation. Their cries have been heard. Churches are growing throughout the country, because for decades they have demonstrated their integrity and their leaders have stood alongside the people.

If you visit Westminster Abbey in London, look up as you enter to a row of new external stone carvings at the west end. There you can see ten 20th century martyrs, including Lucian Tapiedi, from PNG's Oro province, one of the New Guinea martyrs. He was a young member of the staff of St Aidan's Anglican teachers' college. He was determined not to abandon a group of missionary colleagues who sought to evade capture by the Japanese at the same time as Fr Vivian and May were being hunted down. He was hacked to death near a stream by Kurumbo village by a man named Hivijapa who wished to court the all-conquering Japanese. He later converted to Christianity, took the name Lucian as his new family name, and built a church at Embi dedicated to his victim's memory.

That great leader John F Kennedy, also himself a martyr of sorts, wrote: "To be courageous requires no exceptional qualifications, no magic formulas, no special combination of time, place and circumstance. It is an opportunity that sooner or later is presented to us all."

Kennedy was for all his many flaws, a man of courage. So was Thomas More, the Man for All Seasons, who was also a man of conscience. He wrote in his final letters from the Tower of London where he was confined for 14 months, of the uniqueness of the individual conscience, while also viewing the formation of conscience as the fruit of an education "in the truth." Nothing could be further from the post-modern fad - now, mercifully, becoming passé - that there is no truth, only propaganda and self-promotion.

The cross which the New Guinea martyrs took up in 1942 is a place of truth.

'Were you there?'" the spiritual asks. We hear from our gospel, that Greeks were certainly there, eager to see Jesus. They were our representatives. Jesus opened himself to them.

After the 8 o'clock service, someone said to me: "I don't know what I would have done, confronted by the same terrible situation as the New Guinea martyrs faced."

In what way were Fr Vivian or Lucian Tapiedi different from any of us? In what way are we facing challenges of conscience? The good news – and today's most important message – is that we can prepare ourselves for the big challenges that will surely come to all of us. We can prepare ourselves through spiritual discipline and education in "the truth" for the life-changing confrontations that may come our way. How best can we do this? There is only one way, one truth, one life through which we can do this, and that is through constantly deepening our relationship with Jesus.

If anyone would serve me, let them follow me.