

The Martyrs of Uganda

By Grant LeMarquand

Our church year is dotted with a variety of commemorative feasts, days which the church has set aside so that we can give thanks for the life and witness of particular people, people who reveal something to us about what it means to follow Jesus. June 3 is such a day, the feast of "The Martyrs of Uganda".

Christianity arrived in the kingdom of the Baganda people (now called Uganda) in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The first missionaries, British Anglicans and French Roman Catholics, were warmly received by the Kabaka, the king, Mutesa, who was impressed that they behaved well and brought no slaves. The mission went well and the first Anglicans were baptized on March 18, 1882. But on October 9, 1884, Mutesa died.

The new king, Mwanga, was young, just eighteen. He was suspicious of foreigners and had a savage temper. In October, 1885, after a dangerous overland trek from the Indian Ocean coast, the new Bishop of East Equatorial Africa, James Hannington, made the mistake of entering Uganda from the east, the traditional entry point for enemies. He was detained and on October 29 executed on order of Mwanga.

But Mwanga did not limit his fury to foreigners. Already in January of the same year Mwanga had had three Anglican boys dismembered and burned because they were working for a missionary, Alexander Mackay, who had refused Mwanga's protection.

The worst punishments, however, were reserved for Mwanga's own servants. Many of the boys of the king's court had become Christians. They were called "readers" because they had become literate in order to read the Bible, which Mackay was translating. On May 25, 1886, Mwanga called for some servants. Two pages entered, named Ssebuggwawo and Mwafu. When he questioned their activities of the day Mwafu answered that he had been learning about the Christian faith from Ssebuggwawo. Mwanga exploded. The king had learned the practice of sodomy from Arab traders and Mwafu was his favourite. Mwanga knew that if Mwafu became a Christian he would no longer comply. Three Christian servants were beaten and killed that day; nine more were executed in various ways over the next week. Thirty-seven were detained at the execution site at Namugongo, knowing that their end was not far. The story of the last days of this mixed group of Roman Catholic and Anglican teenagers, led by the young catechist Charles Lwanga, is one of mutual encouragement, of support for one another in prayer, of steadfast refusal to recant.

The missionaries were heartsick. They pleaded for the release of the prisoners. They were not forbidden to preach but were told that as many as were converted would be killed.

Finally June 3 arrived. Lwanga was killed at the place of detention, roasted over a slow fire. It is said that he told his executioners that though they were burning him it was as though they were pouring water over his feet, 'Beware', he said, 'of the fire that lasts forever.' The rest were marched a mile away where they were rolled in reed mats and bound. Four of the younger boys were clubbed to death to spare them the pain. Five were given a last minute pardon. At noon the pyre was lit. Thirty-one martyrs were burned.

The violence of the Kabaka's persecution scattered other believers throughout the kingdom where more 'reading' soon sprung up. The faith of Ugandan Christianity, nurtured by the witness of the martyrs, has lived through more recent periods of violence. The regimes of Amin and Obote have both claimed their victims: Archbishop Janani Luwum, murdered by Idi Amin, is now commemorated along with the young boys of the nineteenth century.

Today in Namugongo, in the suburbs of Kampala, there is a small Anglican theological college. In the late 1980's, in the last days of the regime of President Milton Obote, the Principal of that college was a man named Kasira. One night soldiers came looking for some of the students of that college. Kasira, claiming that he was responsible for those students, refused to give any information to the soldiers. They killed him where he stood. In a world which continues to be a place of violence the martyrs of Uganda remind us

that there will be a day when every tear shall be wiped away, but that now we are called to mutual encouragement, prayer, steadfast faith and self-giving love.

This article first appeared in The Niagara Anglican in June 1995. Used with permission.

The Rev. Dr. Grant LeMarquand is Academic Dean and Associate Professor of Biblical Studies and Mission at Trinity. Dr. LeMarquand has written and edited numerous articles and books, including Why Haven't You Left? Letters from the Sudan and A Comparative Study of the Story of the Bleeding Woman in North Atlantic and African Contexts. He is executive editor of Trinity's new theological journal, the Trinity Journal for Theology & Ministry and international editor of Anglican and Episcopal History.