

# Anglican-Lutheran Society

## Annual Meeting 2021

By Zoom from All-Hallows-by-the-Tower, Byward Street, London EC3 5BJ

Saturday 6th March, 2021

### **‘WITNESS THROUGH SERVICE AND SACRIFICE’**

Martyrdom and the Church Today

#### **FIRST PRESENTATION**

**The Rt Rev Guli Francis-Dequani, Bishop of Loughborough**

***“The Blood of the Martyrs is The Seed of The Church:  
What lessons might we learn from the persecuted church?”***

I’ve been invited here today to share with you some thoughts on the relationship between *Marturia* and *diakonia* – *martyrdom and service*. In light of my own experiences to offer some reflections about what these two important Christian concepts may mean for us – for those who are Christians and involved in church life in Britain.

I’m proposing to start by looking at the two words separately – to consider their definitions, their etymology and how their meaning may have changed over time. I’m not a linguist but I do think we can learn a lot by analysing familiar words and in the process can sometimes be rewarded by new insights hidden within the folds.

Having done that, I’ll then share something of my own story. My apologies to those of you who know me and might be familiar with this section of the talk! I will keep it as brief as possible but context is everything and I’m conscious that what I say today grows very much out of who I am and how I’ve been shaped by my experiences.

I’ll finish by drawing out a couple of motifs which I hope will tie in with the topic of this event – some reflections on how service and sacrifice might be relevant for churches today.

#### **Marturia**

Marturia is a Greek word, commonly translated as martyrdom. In origin it simply meant witness - a testimony or account. A martyr might have been someone who testified to certain facts before a judge, for example. It was Luke in his Gospel account who first used the word with a specifically religious connotation - a martyr being one who witnessed or bore testimony to the life and deeds of Jesus Christ. Near the end of the Gospel, just before his ascension, Luke has Jesus appear to the disciples, show them the scars of crucifixion, remind them of his own mission, and then say, “You are witnesses of these things” and he uses the word martyr.

As Christianity began to spread the term gradually came to be reserved for those whose witness led to endurance of hardship and eventually to those whose suffering actually led to death. It's worth mentioning, that the reality of martyrdom in the early centuries shaped the emerging church, and its developing theology and ecclesiology. The depiction of martyrs as figures to be revered and emulated led to the origin of the cult of saints, for example. Church architecture was influenced as shrines were built on sites where people had been martyred, a liturgical cycle of feasts was developed to commemorate martyrs and these, in tandem with the events of Jesus' birth, death and resurrection, gave us, in time, the church calendar. The relics of martyrs became a focus for Christian devotion and the ultimate sacrifice through martyrdom, itself an imitation of the example of Christ, further strengthened understanding of the ideal nature of Christian fidelity – that some truths are so fundamental and crucial for human existence that we should be willing to give up our lives in order for them to be heard.

Martyrdom has been understood in different ways over the centuries. Some have willingly sought it as an ultimate badge of faithfulness, others have romanticised it, thus undermining the cost, and there's been endless debate about precisely how to define who can be classed as a martyr. Augustine of Hippo in the 4<sup>th</sup> century concluded that it wasn't the punishment itself but the *reason* for the punishment that determined who was a martyr. This means there are grey areas for over the years there have been many Christians who've died not just in defence of doctrinal truths connected with faith but in the cause of some political campaign or a fight against racial, ethnic or economic prejudice. Oscar Romero and the liberation theologians of Latin America come to mind, for example. I don't want to argue for too tight a definition of martyrdom but to illustrate that context matters and that sacrifice in the cause of truth is complex.

For now, and to end this section, I want to underline (what I'm sure we already know) that martyrdom is not an ancient phenomenon. Whilst we may think of the pre-Constantine era (1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries) as the classic period for martyrdom, if I can put it like that, we do well to remind ourselves that more Christians died for their faith during the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in all the centuries of Roman persecution combined. We need look only at how the ancient iconography around martyrdom has changed - from Lawrence and his grill, Catherine and her wheel, Lucy and her detached eyes, we now have barbed wire, electrodes, the noose and firing squad of the contemporary world. Martyrdom is as old as the stoning of Stephen and as contemporary as the beheading of father Jacques Hamel, the French Roman Catholic priest killed in 2016 during an attack on a church in Normandy by Islamic extremists.

### **Diakonia**

Moving on to the term Diakonia, also a Greek word which originally denoted an establishment built near a church specifically to attend to the needs of the poor and the distribution of charity. Diakonia is a Christian theological term that appears 32 times in the NT, translated variously as ministry, service or relief. It's used of Martha's preparation and serving of food in Luke (10. 40), it refers to the ministry of word in Acts (6.4), Paul uses it to reference his ministry among the Gentiles (in Acts 20.24 and 21. 19), and in Romans 12 (6-7) diakonia is referred to as a spiritual gift – the gift of serving. So the word has different meanings depending on context but is used broadly as a catchall for service or ministry offered in particular by those who are themselves under authority, executing the commands of others. Hence the term deacon – one who serves under the authority of the bishop.

In the NT, deacons were a separate class of church ministers, charged with particular material duties involving service to those in need. Over time they became part of the threefold order or ministry – Bishops, Priests and Deacons – and are given particular liturgical duties as well as practical ones in service of the community. Despite this, emphasis around the role of the deacon has in some respects diminished since the Middle Ages and in most western episcopal churches it's regarded simply as a necessary stage in preparation for priesthood. Although ordination as a priest, or indeed a bishop, doesn't stop one from being a deacon, the danger is that the service element gets somewhat subsumed by the hierarchy and underemphasised in the life of discipleship.

Despite the presence of female deacons in the NT, for centuries, the church didn't allow women to be ordained as deacon even while it relied heavily on what one might argue was the diaconal role of many women. The C of E allowed women into the diaconate in 1986 but with the ordination of women as priests in 1994 the idea of a distinctive diaconate ministry began to fade though I'm delighted to see tentative signs of its re-mergence more recently, for men and for women.

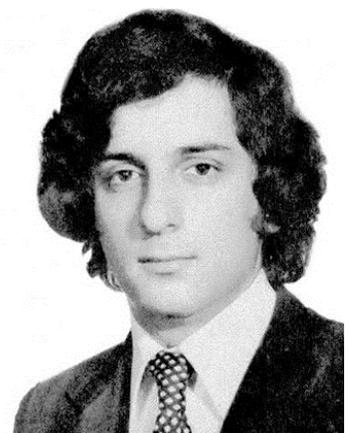
### **My story**

So I've painted a kind of backdrop by way of context and history underlying the ideas of martyrdom, which I'm broadly defining as sacrificial witness and diakonia as servant hearted ministry. I'm going to move on now to share with you something of my own personal story.

I started life in Iran where I was born and grew up. My father was a Muslim convert from a small village in the centre of the country and my mother, the daughter and granddaughter of missionaries, herself born and raised in Iran. By the time I was born, my father had been ordained and was serving as Bishop of the Anglican church in Iran, made up of missionaries and other foreigners working in the country as well as converts and second generation Christians. We lived a somewhat curious life between and betwixt the worlds of Islam and Christianity, Persian and English, East and West. The famous missionary Henry Martyn had first translated the Bible into Persian in 1812 and as I grew up our worship was entirely in Persian.

This unusual childhood was what I considered normal. It was all I knew and for the most part my two worlds of school and wider society on one hand, and home and church life on the other coexisted reasonably peaceably with some occasional overlap. All that changed as the events leading to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 began to unfold. At school I started to be ostracised by friends and teachers and at home, the church was coming under increasing pressure. To cut a very long story short, institutions such as hospitals and various schools were forcibly taken over or closed, church offices and the bishop's house were ransacked, the church's financial assets were frozen, one of the clergy was found murdered in his study, my father was briefly imprisoned before an attack on his life in which he survived but my mother was injured.

For us as a family events culminated in the murder of my brother, Bahram (pictured here), who was 24 years old. His car was ambushed on his way back from work and he was shot in the head. My father was out of the country for meetings at the time and although no one was ever brought to justice we've always understood that my brother was targeted because of his association with the church and because he was his father's son. We later learned that he'd been aware of the impending danger but had refused to flee the country. My



brother Bahram, and Revd Arastoo Sayyah, who was assassinated in his study, are remembered as martyrs of the church in Iran and are commemorated in the chapel of martyrs in Canterbury Cathedral. After Bahram's funeral, knowing it wasn't safe for my father to return, my mother and sister I joined him in England, assuming we'd be back home within weeks or months. That wasn't to



be and having arrived as a refugee aged 14, here I still am, now a fully-fledged British citizen, over 40 years later. I have now been in exile for longer than the people of Israel after they fled Egypt but the Promised Land still seems far off. My father continued working as Bishop in Iran in exile until his retirement and dedicated his life to supporting and encouraging Christians still in Iran, working with Iranians in this country, and writing and translating Christian literature

in Persian. Both my parents have now died. In the picture Guli is left, her sister Shirin is right and their mother, Margaret is with their father. (Photo: Church Times)

### **Forgiveness, fear and hope**

From this potted autobiography I want to draw out three themes, namely forgiveness, fear and hope all of which have something to say about how the ideas of martyrdom and sacrifice may speak to us in the UK today.

#### *Forgiveness*

I have a vivid recollection of hearing my father preach, during a service whilst we were still in Iran, but after the troubles had started. I must have been 11 or 12. He spoke of having preached about forgiveness for years but that now he was realising the words had been theoretical. Now he was feeling the full burden. Talking about forgiveness had been easy when it didn't cost very much. But reality was dawning that forgiveness is painful and costly. The desire to embrace it and the commitment to try and practice it may be instant, but the journey towards it is slow; full of ups and downs, twists and turns. Forgiveness is complex and this isn't the time to explore it fully. There's no doubt it's been misused, perhaps even cheapened and abused over the years. We must be very cautious in our language, and should never impose the idea on those who are suffering. That said, forgiveness remains a central Christian theme and one we can't ignore; and it ties in not only with the themes of fear and hope but those of sacrifice and service. Words of forgiveness were spoken by Jesus as he offered the ultimate sacrifice on the cross, by Stephen whose faithful witness and service saw him stoned to death and by many martyrs down the centuries.

By way of illustration I want to share with you the prayer my father wrote after my brother was killed. He dictated the words to my mother over the telephone and the prayer was read, in the original Persian, at Bahram's funeral in Isfahan. This is the English translation which has become known as the forgiveness prayer.

*O God, we remember not only Bahram but his murderers.  
Not because they killed him in the prime of his youth and made our hearts bleed and our tears  
flow;*

*Not because with this savage act they have brought further disgrace on the name of our country among the civilized nations of the world;  
But because through their crime we now follow more closely your footsteps in the way of sacrifice. The terrible fire of this calamity burns up all selfishness and possessiveness in us. Its flame reveals the depth of depravity, meanness and suspicion, the dimension of hatred and the measure of sinfulness in human nature;  
It makes obvious as never before our need to trust in your love as shown in the cross of Jesus and his resurrection,  
Love that makes us free from all hatred towards our persecutors;  
Love which brings patience, forbearance, courage, loyalty, humility, generosity and greatness of heart;  
Love which more than ever deepens our trust in God's final victory and his eternal designs for the Church and for the world;  
Love which teaches us how to prepare ourselves to face our own day of death.  
O God,  
Bahram's blood has multiplied the fruit of the Spirit in the soil of our souls: so when his murderers stand before you on the Day of Judgment, remember the fruit of the Spirit by which they have enriched our lives, and forgive.*

I've lived with this prayer for most of my life but it's only relatively recently that I've properly pondered it, trying to appreciate and understand more deeply something of my father's faith and emotions as he wrote it. In doing so it has struck me forcibly that although the words hope and fear are never used, the prayer is infused with the idea of hope and freedom from fear. The prayer defines forgiveness as the thing that allows us to trust more completely. Forgiveness frees us from hatred, helps us to love more completely and releases us from the fear of our own death. I wish now that I'd quizzed my father more but it seems to me that mingled in with the pain the prayer is brimming with positivity. What he seemed to be saying was that you need pain and suffering to fully comprehend the meaning of hope and to be free of fear; and the gateway from suffering to hope and fearlessness is forgiveness; that through painful experiences we understand more fully how to trust, how to embrace hope and cast out fear. You have to experience anxiety, pain, suffering, hopelessness to truly know what hope is. It was Vaclav Havel who said "perhaps hopelessness is the very soil that nourishes human hope". We have to inhabit the pain and suffering of Good Friday and dwell with it, to fully experience the hope and joy of Easter resurrection.

### **Reflections on the themes of *marturia* and *diakonia* – sacrifice and service**

And all of this brings me at long last to explore what martyrdom and service might mean for us today.

Here in the west for the most part we enjoy the freedoms of democracy – freedom of religion, being one of them. Notwithstanding the increase in terrorist activities we are less likely than Christians in many other parts of the world to face martyrdom because of our faith. There are some who talk of Christians being persecuted in this country, for being banned from wearing a cross by some employers, for being mocked and ridiculed in the media or by comedians, for having to endure pressing arguments about bishops being removed from the House of Lords or the church being disestablished altogether. I don't adhere to this way of thinking. The idea that these things amount to persecution is I think offensive to those who are imprisoned, tortured and killed.

However, I do think that because of our shrinking numbers and our loss of influence in society, we are living with fear and a lack of hope. We are anxious about the loss of identity, about our survival and at times it almost seems like we are gripped by fear in such a way that it consumes us and inhibits us from living as those who are resurrection people, people of hope for whom service is an expression of perfect freedom.

Now, I have to be careful what I say, or at least how I say it. I'm a serving bishop in the Church of England, mindful of the responsibilities that come with that position. So I offer you my honest reflections in a spirit of gentle exploration not a position of hard and fast certainty. In light of everything I've said so far, I'm not sure that what I perceive to be an excessive emphasis on growth in our churches is particularly helpful. In the C of E, at least, millions of pounds are being poured into new initiatives which involve setting ambitious targets for an increase in number of Christian worshippers over the course of just a few years. I myself have been leading on one of these initiatives in the Diocese of Leicester. But the problem, it seems to me, is that we are setting targets and time scales, as if the future of the church depends on us. As if this is an economic or business problem that can be solved by human endeavour. And as if the church has been at its best historically when it's been largest and most powerful – a premise I resist.

Instead of putting our efforts into regaining our level of influence and increasing our numbers, I wonder if we might be better accepting our place on the margins and putting our efforts into listening to what God might be telling us about the church, the needs of the world and how we may play in serving that world at this time and place. To do that, we must find meaning in the present reality rather than trying to resist it.

As the revolution was gathering storm in Iran, my father spoke these words which I still have as a poster up on my study wall: "The way of the cross has suddenly become so meaningful that we have willingly walked in it with our Lord near us. Our numbers have become smaller, our earthly supports have gone, but we are learning the meaning of faith in a new and deeper way."

For the church in Iran things were not turning out as my father had intended. These words are him mourning the past, acknowledging present reality and finding meaning there in. The Revolution brought the opportunity for a closer walk with God, for a whole new way of experiencing the cross; it offered the possibility of practicing the Christian virtue of hope. It was the call to sacrifice and to service in a whole new way.

What are the opportunities for us as churches in the UK, where we find ourselves now, especially given the pandemic and all that's happened over the past year? Can we find any meaning in our current situation? Where are the seeds of hope? What might we be able to learn from the persecuted church?

Well, if we take the idea at the core of martyrdom to be one of sacrifice, of kenosis or self-emptying, of losing our identity rather than trying to save it, in the manner of Christ on the cross, maybe we could be less fearful about loss and more able to find meaning and ultimately hope in our present reality. These days there is little talk of sacrifice as part of discipleship, never mind ministry. There seems to be more emphasis on rights and responsibilities and on leadership, than on sacrifice. Sometimes it feels like sacrifice is outdated and old fashioned. Wellbeing is important, of course it is, and sacrifice can't be imposed otherwise it is abuse. But if we lose the idea of sacrifice altogether we lose something deeply precious. Sacrifice evokes a whole different way of living – one

that Christians may offer as a gift to the world, regardless of how small or large the church is, how powerful or powerless.

I'm conscious that my early experiences in Iran have given me a theology that is cross focused. One in which it's difficult to escape themes around justice and the link between suffering or sacrifice and redemption. Resurrection is not a triumphalist statement but a cross-shaped mystery and if we could embrace that more fully in this country I wonder if it would liberate us in the service we offer, without fear of our own demise or the need to see growth as proof that we're doing it right.

Earlier I suggested that martyrdom didn't just impact individuals but infused the developing character of the early church. So what would it mean for us to ponder the possibility of the *church's* martyrdom in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain? What might it mean for the church to explore kenosis or sacrifice as a calling. For the church to die to itself, to risk losing its identity – which is the opposite of striving to survive - in order to allow God to bring forth new life in ways we may not even be able to imagine. The key to this would be the commitment to listen to God's voice through prayer. If we were to cease our strivings and listen patiently, what might we learn and hear that at present we might be missing amidst all the noise and activity. We won't know until we enter the silence.

Tertullian famously said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church". Certainly in Iran the experience has been that against all odds, the tiny church continues to survive. That the blood of the martyrs and the ongoing suffering of those who continue as living sacrifices keeps hope alive (notwithstanding all their problems and challenges). God has not deserted Christians in Iran, though the evidence may suggest otherwise. And no more will God desert us in this country either.

The idea of the church being martyred is probably a shocking one for some (though no more shocking, I suggest, than the idea of God's son dying on a cross). But it might be difficult to grasp and perhaps controversial. There may be all kinds of theological objections and pitfalls that I've not noticed. I confess the notion is embryonic in my own thinking and this is the first time I'm testing the idea publicly. But as I've grappled with what it might be that the churches in England could learn from the persecuted church in Iran and elsewhere, I can't escape the fact that amidst the clumsiness of my words there may just be some kernel of truth worth exploring further – a pearl of great price, even. But it will take courage and we will have to resist the need to control the outcome.

Suffering isn't good in itself and we should speak out and take action wherever we see injustice. And yet through the idea of forgiveness we also know that extraordinary good can come out of the most evil of situations. But transformation seldom requires us to go back to how things were. Rather we are to let go of what's been in order for something new to be born, like a butterfly emerging from the chrysalis.

And alongside this idea of sacrifice and self-emptying, of letting go – in short, of martyrdom – is the constant call to service, or diakonia - a non-anxious kind of service which means that without fear about our survival, we can continue as faithful and prayerful witnesses, as those who work in partnership with all kinds of people, to relieve suffering, to promote peace, model reconciliation, to live as people of faith.