

### **Wednesday Reflection, 20 September 2023**

Today the Church commemorates John Coleridge Patteson, the first Anglican Bishop of Melanesia, who died a martyr's death on this day in 1871.

Melanesia is a group of 2,000 islands north of Australia and New Zealand in the South Pacific Ocean. As a young man, Patteson met and was greatly influenced by George August Selwyn, the Bishop of New Zealand. Aged 28, he left Britain to work under Selwyn and to begin his life's work among the Melanesian people, and he was in time consecrated as their first Bishop. He was a brilliant linguist and he was able to learn many of the indigenous languages. Indeed, he translated the gospels into 23 of the 1,000 indigenous languages; he lived alongside the people, getting to know them, their languages and customs, and so he was able to teach them the Christian faith in ways in which they could understand and relate to their culture.

Patteson was determined to seek to enable Melanesian people to become Church leaders and evangelists; in this sense, he was far ahead of his time. Under his influence and leadership, the Christian faith spread rapidly. Coleridge wanted to ensure that young Melanesians were trained in the Bible and theology so he encouraged them to attend the missionary School he established, St Barnabas' College. Once trained, he would send them back to their home villages as evangelists and teachers.

But there were problems. Although slavery had been formally abolished, there were groups of white men called 'blackbirders' who travelled to Melanesia and 'recruited', often by force and coercion, young Melanesians to go to Australia and Fiji to work on the plantations. They were in effect slave-traders, treating the men very harshly and cruelly and many died. Patteson tried hard with local leaders to get blackbirding abolished, but often the slave-traders got around this by offering sham employment terms, which were never honoured.

One day in 1871, Patteson travelled to a new island called Nukapu in the Solomon Islands. Unfortunately, the blackbirders had recently captured five men from that island and forcibly transported them. Patterson left his companions in the boat, and went ashore alone. He hoped to persuade them that not all white men were slave traders who would take away their children. But when he landed, he was attacked and killed, possibly to avenge the blackbirders raid. Perhaps the islanders had been told that he encouraged men to go away from home to college and they assumed he was a blackbirder. His companions were also attacked and two of them died. Records suggest that the islanders realized their mistake, that he was a man of peace

and love, so they treated his dead body with dignity. And other members of Patteson's team were also killed in other places.

And there are not the only martyrs of the Church. In 2003 seven brothers from the Anglican religious order, the Melanesian Brotherhood, were also martyred for their faith.

They are greatly honoured in the Church of Melanesia to this day. As Jesus in today's gospel teaches that those who lose their lives for his sake and the sake of the gospel will save their lives for life eternal. We rejoice at their witness and the zeal and depth of their commitment to the Lord in seeking to spread the gospel whatever the cost.

I close with the prayer from the Melanesian Prayer Book which will be prayed by the Church there today.

Almighty God,

you have given your chosen servants, grace to give glory to you  
by their good lives, strong faith and holy deaths;

We give you great praise for the life of your servant John Coleridge Patteson, our  
first bishop,

And for the great example given to us by those who died with him,

Joseph Atkin, priest, and Stephen Taroaniara, teacher.

We bless you too for Edwin Nobbs and Fisher Young, killed at Santa Cruz;

Arthur Ako, killed at Fiu;

Thomas Amasia, killed at Norefou;

John Barge, killed in New Britain;

Charles Godden, killed on Aoba;

James Ivo, killed at Norefou;

Thomas Peo, killed at Santa Cruz;

who willingly laid down their lives while doing your work.

We also give thanks for George Augustus Selwyn, Bishop of New Zealand,  
who first told the Good News in these Islands, and for all who have served you in  
this Diocese

so that your people might live without fear and with hope of eternal life, through  
Jesus Christ our Saviour, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit for ever.  
Amen.