

## **Reflection on the Seven Melanesian Martyrs of 2003 by David Kennedy**

Today, 24 April, the Anglican Communion commemorates the martyrdom of seven members of the Melanesian Brotherhood in 2003.

Melanesia is a group of 2,000 Islands in the South Pacific, including Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Fiji and Vanuatu. Back in 1925 a remarkable Anglican layman Ini Kopuria and the then Anglican Bishop of Melanesia, John Manwaring Steward, had the vision of forming a group of religious Brothers who would adopt a monastic way of life, but with a strong missionary purpose. They are known as the Melanesian Brotherhood. Their primary task was to take the Gospel to the many islands of Melanesia where the Gospel had not yet been preached. The Brothers take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and their work is rooted in saying the seven traditional monastic offices and receiving the Eucharist daily. Interestingly, while some took life vows, other Brothers would serve for a period of years before being released from their vows and returning to regular life.

You may recall that last year we remembered the first Bishop of Melanesia, John Coleridge Patteson who was martyred along with others in 1871. Others were martyred between 1904 and 1926.

We often think of martyrs as figures from the dim and distant past. But more recently, seven members of the Melanesian Brotherhood were martyred in 2003, only twenty years ago. In 2003, there was serious civil unrest on the Solomon Islands. One of the Brothers, Nathaniel Sado, went to try to mediate; he sought to be a peace-maker and mediator in the name of the Prince of Peace. However, a guerilla group captured, tortured and killed him at Easter 2003. A group of six Brothers, led by the Assistant Head of the Brotherhood, Robin Lindsay, went in April of 2003 to try to repatriate his body. The other five were called Francis Tofi, Alfred Hill, Ini Paratabutu, Patteson Gatu and Tony Sirihi. Perhaps they thought there would be safety in numbers. Alas, some were executed immediately on 24<sup>th</sup> April, others tortured and then executed on the following day. This led to the eventual arrest of the guerilla leader and the bodies of the seven were exhumed and brought back for Christian burial at the mother house at Tabalia on the Solomon Islands.

Today, the Melanesian Brotherhood numbers 80-100 Brothers and it is a vibrant and faith-filled community, including many young men. It still seeks to bring the Gospel

to new people and to encourage those who have lapsed to return to active faith and discipleship. It is a jewel in the Anglican crown of faith and active service.

Jesus, in today's Gospel reading says to us, 'I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain the darkness.' That almost could be a founding text of this remarkable movement. But there is a cost to following Christ, especially where the darkness of violence and hatreds hold sway. The lives of the seven Brothers were tragically cut short and yet their faith and love of Christ still inspires many to come to the light of Christ's love. The Church greatly honours its martyrs, and now they dwell with their risen Lord in the joy of his Easter victory. May their example strengthen our faith, and may we follow them in seeking to bear witness to the same faith that fills our hearts. I close with the prayer that will be prayed by the Church in Melanesia today:

Creator God,  
whose majesty is in the storm as well as the calm,  
we thank you for those of every race  
who gave their lives in Melanesia for the sake of Christ;  
may your church always proclaim your gospel,  
live out your commandments,  
and overcome the powers of darkness,  
through Jesus Christ our redeemer. Amen.