

## English Saints and Martyrs of the Reformation Era

Today the Church of England commemorates the English saints and martyrs of the Reformation era. That was a particularly turbulent time in the life of our nation when acts of violence and cruelty were committed on both sides of the religious divide.

The case for reform in the Church at that time was undeniably strong. The ideas promoted by the reformers were important and valid. At the same time the backlash was perhaps understandable. It is natural and even right that people should have strong convictions on both sides. What is so difficult for us today, though, is the way this conflict was pursued and the effect it had on people's lives.

There are ways and means of disagreeing which do not involve violence or cruelty – ways that are instead peaceable and rational. In any dispute reasoned arguments and dialogue are the sensible way forward. That is a far cry from imposing one's beliefs on others, whether they are willing to accept them or not.

It is of course difficult for us to get into the mind-set of the sixteenth century. In many ways power and authority operated differently from our own day. The power of the monarch was absolute. There were not the democratic institutions and channels that we enjoy in our country today. Not that that is true of all parts of our world today, though.

In our Bible reading just now (2 Corinthians 4.5-12) St Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth that professing the Christian faith is not always easy. He himself suffered hardship and persecution. Yet in the face of that they are called to remain steadfast and full of hope.

That was the lot of many of the men and women we commemorate today. We admire their courage and their wholehearted commitment to what they firmly believed. That does not mean, though, that their suffering was in any way justified or excusable.

There was an interesting television programme the other day about life in Norwich during the period of the Tudors. That brought home how excruciatingly painful and cruel, even barbaric, the torture and death was that was inflicted on those who did challenge the accepted beliefs at the time, both Catholics and Protestants. The aim was to cause not only pain but also humiliation.

In that respect the parallel with our Lord's crucifixion was all too clear. The irony is that these executions were carried out in the name of God, in the name of the crucified and risen Christ.

In many ways we have thankfully moved on from the horrors of the sixteenth century as far as disputes within the Christian Church are concerned. Yet equally horrific acts of violence, cruelty and humiliation are carried on a daily basis in our world today. As Christians we are to pray and work for an end to all that and to proclaim the better way of peace and love.

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