

St Maximilian Kolbe

Thirteen years ago I visited the former concentration camp at Dachau just outside Munich. It was a very sobering experience thinking of the thousands who were imprisoned and lost their lives there. Yet in comparison the horrors of that place were overshadowed by the far greater atrocity of Auschwitz.

Auschwitz was the ultimate killing machine. The cold and calculated cruelty inflicted there cannot be imagined. The number of victims is inconceivable. And yet there were also heroes, one of whom was commemorated by the Church this last Monday.

Fr Maximilian Kolbe was a Polish Roman Catholic priest and Franciscan friar. After the Nazi invasion of Poland he was arrested together with other intellectuals and imprisoned in Auschwitz. When a prisoner escaped another was chosen to forfeit his life as an example, by being starved to death. The Polish man chosen had a wife and children. Fr Maximilian stepped forward to take that man's place, and two weeks later on 14th August 1941 having survived the starvation and dehydration inflicted on him he was put to death by means of a lethal injection.

The man whose place he had taken survived the war and died in 1995 at the age of 93. He thus lived to witness Fr Maximilian's canonization in 1982. His fellow Pole Pope John Paul II declared Fr Maximilian "The Patron Saint of Our Difficult Century".

This was a supreme act of love on his part. He gave his life in order that another might live. In a very real way he followed the example of his Lord who died on a cross to save us all. He took to heart the words of your Lord we heard in our reading just now (Matthew 16.24-26): "Those who lose their life for my sake will find it." In a very tangible way he took up his cross and followed his Lord.

Fr Maximilian is one of ten 20th century martyrs who are depicted in statues above the Great West Door of Westminster Abbey. And it is right that we should remember his sacrifice in our church here, dedicated as it is to peace and reconciliation, to the power of God's love over all that is evil and divisive in our world.

For we live in a world where there is still war and conflict, hatred and injustice, acts of terror and of genocide. Fr Maximilian Kolbe is very much still a saint for our own day. We give thanks for his faith, his love, his example.

18th August 2017
Kingsley Boulton