

Sermon for the Closing of Synod, Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf

February 6, 2025

Ven Paul Feheley

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost Amen.

I want to begin this sermon by telling you 6 names:

Pedro Baptisa, Francisco Blanco, Philip de las Casas, Paul Miki John Soan of Goto, and James Kisai

You are forgiven if you don't instantly recognise the names. of those 3 Franciscans and 3 Jesuits

On this day in 1597, those six along with 20 other Christians including a 12-year-old boy were crucified near the Japanese city of Nagasaki.

Jesuit missionaries had been active in Japan for over forty years, and they had converted large numbers from every class of Japanese society. The ruling Shogun eventually banned all missionary activity because he feared that the growth of the Christian Church among his people would prepare the way for an invasion by Europeans. The Jesuits took care not to offend the Shogun and were able to continue with their work by becoming as much like the Japanese in dress and habits as they could. But in 1593 a group of Franciscans arrived, who openly flaunted the decree against missionary activity and rivalries ensued between the two orders. Three Franciscans, three Jesuits and twenty Japanese Christians were arrested. The prisoners were subjected to torture, then marched the 750 km from Osaka to Nagasaki. There, on a hill over-looking the city, they found twenty-six crosses planted in a row. Each prisoner was tied to his cross; then the executioner went down the row, piercing each one twice with a spear.

Today, as we gather for this Eucharist, we remember the Martyrs of Japan, that group of Christians who stood firm in their faith during a time of intense persecution. Their story is one of courage, sacrifice, and unshakable devotion to Christ, even in the face of death. This day invites us to reflect on the call to faithfulness, the hope of eternal life, and the power of witnessing to the Gospel, even in the most difficult and dangerous of circumstances.

In the readings for today, we are confronted with the reality of what it means to live as people of God in a world often hostile to the truth of the Gospel. The martyrdom of Christians in Japan is a vivid reminder that the call to follow Christ is not merely about comfort and ease but about bearing witness to the truth, even at great cost.

The martyrs of Japan were not just victims of persecution; they were witnesses to the Gospel, and their deaths were an act of faith. They followed the example of Jesus, who, as we read in the Gospels, was willing to take up his own cross for the sake of the world. The martyrs of Japan did precisely this. In refusing to deny their faith, they demonstrated the depth of their commitment to Jesus and to his kingdom.

The courage of these martyrs, who chose to die rather than renounce their faith, challenges us to consider our own commitment to Christ. Do we, in our comfortable and secular world, take our faith as seriously as these martyrs did? Do we, when faced with trials and challenges, choose to follow Christ, even if it means personal loss or suffering? The martyrs of Japan call us to examine our own discipleship and to ask whether we are truly ready to follow Jesus, no matter the cost.

Where and How does this Synod fit in with the Martyrs of Japan? What can we learn from them?

First, we are reminded of the cost of discipleship. Christianity calls us to take up our cross and follow Christ. For some, this may mean facing persecution or even death, but for all of us, it means making sacrifices in order to live faithfully to the teachings of Jesus.

It is not for me to judge the success of this synod. The measure of synod is what you take home. We have been given a broader view of the church than just your parish or chaplaincy. We've seen and heard from our brothers and sisters about their work and their ministry. We've heard from beyond ourselves into the province and into the Anglican Communion. Bishop Sean in his opening sermon challenged us about what is your vision he said, it can't be about just one person.

Then on Tuesday he spoke about the trajectory and if indeed we were moving towards God or moving away from God. He also challenged us about how we recognize the voice of Christ in our lives. One of the things that I'm taking back with me is a higher need to risk about my faith. I need to move from comfort to cross bearing. Each time I'm present with you I return home with a greater sense of the sacrifices that are made by the clergy and people of this diocese. So many of you

face extraordinary challenges with complex roles within your ministry, ever changing regulations from Governments and sub congregations galore in extraordinary circumstances.

What are the risks that you need to take to live up to the costs of discipleship?

The American theologian and educationalist John Westerhoff was invited to Northern Ireland to lead a spiritual retreat on reconciliation at a time of high tension and with a mixed group of Catholics and Protestants, young and old. He said that he had prepared diligently for the event given its importance.

When he arrived, he told them he was going to talk about biblical parables. He was immediately challenged about what version of the Bible he was going to use. "New Revised Standard" he said "unacceptable" one group said, "the Jerusalem Bible" he offered the other side said "unacceptable". They finally agreed to allow him to tell Biblical stories in his own words.

He was feeling like a failure as the week slipped by and old animosities seemed to continually rear their ugly heads. One morning meditating on the biblical passage of the Good Samaritan. That morning a young protestant boy got up and crossed over to a Roman Catholic monk on the other side. The story telling came to a silence. The young boy touched the beard of the monk and withdrew his hand quickly. He did it a second time and then a third. "Nothing happened" he said and then repeated "nothing happened". John looked at him and lovingly said "nothing happened?" The boy replied My father said that if I touched him, I would die. With tears welling up in his eyes, the monk said, "Something did happen. You and I will never see the world the same again." Westerhoff comments that after that morning, everything changed on the retreat in conversations between those who had gathered in the name of reconciliation. The Peace process in Ireland was at a critical moment with peace an actual possibility... but it takes people who are willing to risk, daring to trust, opening themselves to a touch of grace.

The cost of discipleship

Second, we are called to witness to the Gospel in all circumstances. The martyrs of Japan were not ashamed of the Gospel, even when it cost them their lives. They were willing to bear witness to the truth of Christ, even in the most hostile of environments. How often do we, in our own lives, fail to speak out for the truth of the Gospel because we fear the opinions of others or the consequences of our actions? The martyrs call us to a bold and courageous faith, one that is not afraid to stand for the truth, no matter the cost.

Many of you know a great deal more than I about hostile environments. Just as the martyrs stood up to that hostility so we've heard and seen moments in this synod of the strength and witness of the gospel. I found myself very moved in listening to Archbishop Hosam yesterday, especially answering the question about what it was like to live in Jerusalem for the last year. No complaints, no bemoaning this or that, rather thanking us for prayers and he talked about the strength that God gives him day by day. That witness is heard worldwide. Wherever we are from Iraq to Nicosia, from

Yemen to Famagusta we need to strengthen our witness, for some that will be in words for others who will be in actions. Bishop Sean asked us how do we have any sense of God's plan for us and trying to discern that is not just our own egos. His response was a good one, equally what I know is that our witness of God's love Gods care and God's faith in us is part of that plan. Too often we limit ourselves we put brakes on our ministry because we think we're doing all we can. That's where the challenge of witness comes in. We want to wait for the big, glorious moments instead of looking around what's right in front of us and what needs are there. What a beautiful witness we can have by our words, by our actions and by our caring gesture

Another Westerboff story of a mother and her son who had a clubbed foot. She rarely let him out as she was trying to protect him but one day allowed him to go to the local shops alone. When he had not returned as quickly as she thought he should, her anxiety grew as she waited and waited. Finally, over the crest of the hill he appeared limping up the street, "Where have you been?" she blurted out. He replied, "I saw Sally she had dropped her doll and it broke." "So, you stopped to help her pick it up?" mother continued. "No, mother," he said, "I had to stay and help her cry."

Finally, the martyrs remind us of the eternal hope that we have in Christ. Even in the face of death, the martyrs of Japan knew that they had been promised eternal life in Christ. They did not fear death because they knew that, through Christ's resurrection, death had been defeated. This hope, this confident expectation of the resurrection, is the foundation of our Christian faith. It is what gives us the strength to endure trials and to remain faithful, even when the way is hard.

When I arrived on Monday morning, I wasn't sure what I was coming into. I've been to a number of synods here. I know many of you on a first name basis but wasn't sure under Bishop Sean's leadership how the synod would operate and where things would be by the end. I head home with a greater sense of hope for the future of this diocese. It feels like there is a re formation that has begun. There is much to do and much to sort out. Yes, there is a deficit in the budget but most importantly in faith you left in money for some new initiatives church planting clergy well-being and youth. If those aren't the hallmarks of a church that's moving forward that's prepared to risk that's prepared to say we have our hope in Christ and nothing and no one can take that away from us, I don't know what is. I'm not trying to paint a picture of Pollyanna that everything will just be wonderful going forward but I do know that there are hard working dedicated loving Christian people here and that by working together by staying together by focusing on unity and what God has called us to do and to be that is what can be achieved in the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf. A Hope and a future from Jeremiah 29 that was the theme of this Synod. Those two words hope and future are indelibly written in my heart and soul and mind. May they be central to your way of

thinking, to your pray life and to our understanding of what God has called us to do and to be.
Amen.