

A celebration of martyrdom challenges us with what it is we are prepared to die for. Even phrasing it like this is a challenge. Should we call it a celebration? What are we celebrating – especially when it's the martyrs of one particular country enmeshed in the politics of their day? More comfortable to believe we've moved on from there, both culturally and politically, and perhaps intellectually too. We might kid ourselves in thinking we can negotiate ourselves out of this one now in a more advanced age. But although the preponderance of the English martyrs was of priests with one hopes a trained intellect of sorts I would suggest it's not this that marks out true martyrdom. It's rather an instinct for the faith which says I cannot do this or that because it would rob me of my Christian identity, of my sense, that is, of belonging to Christ, a sense which is not within our giving or even understanding but something received as Christ lives in us or we live in Christ. The first reading highlights the puzzle of this where Paul doesn't think his way to Macedonia but rather waits on the Spirit to guide him. It's this instinct for the faith which I would suggest is the witness which separates Christians from others and can lead to their condemnation

*“If the world hates you remember that it hated me before you”*

In this sense Christianity is as unreasoned as the hatred of others: a deep and visceral belonging or not belonging to Christ, and it's at this level that we reveal our knowledge of God.

*“But it will be on my account they will do all this because they do not know the one who sent me.”*

This is the sort of knowledge that can only be acquired through love and prayer, or, just as well, the martyrdom of self-offering.

PS We have a connection through Hilary with some of these very English martyrs – she can name at least two among her ancestors: James Duckett born near Kendal, a layman executed in 1601 for selling Catholic books, and John Duckett, a priest martyred in 1644. And also many others in her family who lived the life of self-offering which is the mark or martyrdom of all who live in Christ.

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