

30th July 2020

Martyrs

“If all evil were prevented, much good would be absent from the universe. A lion would cease to live, if there were no slaying of animals; and there would be no patience of martyrs if there were no tyrannical persecution.”

St Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologicae

St Thomas Aquinas gives us an interesting thought with which to begin our “Thought for the Day”. But while I am reticent about challenging such a distinguished saint of the Church, I must disagree with his premise. Is there good in the world only because there is evil? If there were no bad things, would there only be good people? Answers on a postcard, please.

But I’m more interested today in the “patience of martyrs” to which Thomas Aquinas refers. Sitting on my bookshelf is a slim volume from 1857, written by The Rev. Robert McCorkle, entitled *The Tombstones of the Scottish Martyrs*. It records the location of, and wording on, martyrs’ tombstones, and offers stories of those who, in Scotland’s troubled times, gave their lives for their faith. McCorkle reflects, for example, on the memorial to the “martyrs of the covenant” in 1688 in Greyfriars’ Churchyard in Edinburgh. The ivy-grown slab in the wall, he writes, which was almost impossible to find, bears the following inscription:

From May 27, 1661, when the Marquis of Argyle was beheaded, to February 17, 1688, when James Renwick suffered, there were some eighteen thousand one way or another murdered, of whom were executed at Edinburgh about one hundred noblemen, ministers and gentlemen, and others, noble martyrs for Christ.

We can debate the nature of evil and the roots of goodness. But, more importantly, we would do well to remember those who’ve stood for what was right and good, and paid the ultimate price. Maybe we need to learn from their faith and benefit from their commitment. And when we do, even though their “ivy-grown slab” might still be hard to find, the steadfastness of the martyrs is surely clear for all to see.

A prayer for today

Loving God, strengthen my faith as I stand for what is right and good. Surround me always with the saints and martyrs of old, in whose footsteps I walk. Amen

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

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