



21 October 2012
The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity
Choral Evensong
Genesis 12 vv. 1–9
Luke 4 vv. 14–30

Inspirational Leaders



Henry Martyn: Scholar, Missionary and Translator

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Introduction

[‘Inspirational Leaders’](#) is the title of your Evensong series this term. Henry Martyn, who died 200 years ago this year, aged 31, was certainly one of those. He was a student and fellow of this college, a scholar, missionary and translator.

We’ve all enjoyed the Olympics and Paralympics this summer, with its slogan ‘Inspire a Generation’. I heard of one man who was so inspired by them that he sold his bicycle and bought a bigger TV. I’m not sure that was the desired result...

I’ve greatly enjoyed the exhibition on Martyn’s life in the ante-chapel [‘From Truro to Tokat by way of Cambridge’](#) curated jointly by the [Henry Martyn Centre](#) and St John’s College.

It has been wonderful to have time this afternoon with two former members of St Mary’s Church, Islington. [Elizabeth Adekunle](#), your chaplain, who helped me with the confirmation group and grew up in that church, having first attended at one week old, and Sam Williams, a new [chorister](#), whom I baptised in Islington.

This evening, we shall be considering first Henry Martyn’s life as scholar, missionary and translator and then his inspiration and identity in Christ.

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1. Henry Martyn: Scholar, Missionary and Translator

Martyn died in 1812, having in five years translated the New Testament into Urdu (then called Hindostanee) and Farsi (Persian) and supervised its translation into Arabic.

In 1995 I found the following letter in the archives of [Ridley Hall, Cambridge](#):

My dear Sir,

Grieved I am to communicate to you the most distressing intelligence of Mr Martyn's death at Tokat in Asia Minor on his way either to Constantinople or to Aleppo...His papers and property are secured. He set out from Tabriz on the first of September (much too soon for the state in which he had been) and died about the 16th October...Just what words can express the loss which India and the whole world sustained!

The letter is dated February 11, 1813. Charles Simeon, who was vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge for 54 years, was writing to Charles Grant, chairman of the East India Company. Simeon was Martyn's spiritual father since his conversion here in 1800.

Martyn was born in 1781 in Truro. The [baptistry](#) of Truro Cathedral has a series of windows in memory of him. I saw them last weekend, when I gave the Benson lecture there on Saturday and preached on Sunday morning.

His father, John, from a mining background, had taught himself mathematics and became a chief cashier in a mining company. His mother, Elizabeth, died of TB when he was only two years old, and Henry inherited the disease.

At the age of seven, he went to Truro grammar school and came up to St John's College, Cambridge to read mathematics in 1797.

He became 'Senior Wrangler', first in his year, in 1801, won the Smith's prize and later won a latin prize.

While here, he met Patrick Brunty, a poor student and arranged for Henry Thornton, the banker and William Wilberforce, the abolitionist and member of this college, whose statue adorns the ante chapel, to give him each £10 a year. Brunty later changed his name to Bronte and Martyn became a hero in the family as his daughters grew up. Charlotte Bronte, in writing *Jane Eyre*, based the life, if not the character, of St John Rivers on him. Martyn had tried to persuade his love, Lydia Grenfell of Cornwall, to come out to India with him as his wife: St John Rivers, named after this college, failed to do the same with Jane Eyre.

Martyn was elected a Fellow of St John's College and served as a curate at [Holy Trinity Church](#), Cambridge before sailing to India in 1805, as an East India Company Chaplain, rather than, as he hoped, as a missionary with the Church Missionary Society, because the salary enabled him to support his orphaned siblings.

Martyn was one of five Cambridge scholars who served in Bengal as East India Company Chaplains: David Brown was at Magdalene; Claudius Buchanan at Queens'; Daniel Corrie at both Clare and Trinity; and Thomas Thomason was at Queens'.

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Martyn wrote to his friend David Brown in October 1809:

There is a book at the Hikara Press called Celtic Derivatives – this I want; also grammars and dictionaries of all the languages of the earth. I have one or both in Latin, Greek, French, Italian, Portuguese, Dutch, Hebrew, Rabbinical Hebrew, Chaldee, Syriac, Ethiopic, Samaritan, Arabic, Persian, Sanscrit, Bengalee and Hindostanee.

He served first at Dinpore and then at Cawnpore in northern India, where he carried out his translations, with the aid of his assistants. He wanted to perfect his Persian translation and so travelled to Persia with the aim of returning to England via Constantinople to meet Lydia Grenfell again.

He held dialogues with leading Muslims in Shiraz and his memorial plaque in Holy Trinity Church mentions his ‘defending the Christian faith in the heart of Persia against the united talents of the most learned Mahomedans.’

Martyn was buried with full Armenian splendour by the Armenians, who recognised his shining saintliness. This ecumenical recognition is significant for Martyn had also rejoiced in the work of his Baptist colleagues at Serampore near Calcutta.

2. Henry Martyn’s Inspiration and Identity in Christ

Next week is Halloween and I remember taking part in a confirmation service at Salisbury Cathedral on All Hallows Eve in 2009. I was travelling home and realised I needed petrol, so I filled up at Blandford Forum. As I went to pay, the man behind the counter saw my purple shirt and cross and said, ‘Nice fancy dress.’ I didn’t understand his point and said, ‘Pardon?’ He repeated, ‘Nice fancy dress’ and I replied, ‘I wear this all the time’. ‘Yeah, right you do’ he said. I replied ‘I’m the Bishop of Sherborne’ and he said ‘Oops’. I then totally confused him by saying ‘Trick or treat?’

Identity is crucial and can be confusing. Henry Martyn’s identity as scholar, missionary and translator is rooted in this own identity of ‘being in Christ’.

In our New Testament lesson this evening, Luke 4:16-30, we see Jesus as a young man (about Martyn’s age at Persia) in Nazareth, his home town. He local lad who has made good. He is not formally trained nor ordained.

The atmosphere moves from expectation in v 20 (‘The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him’); to initial enthusiasm v 22a (‘All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth’); to doubt v 22b (‘Is this not Joseph’s son?’); on to violent rejection vv 28-9 (‘They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of a hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.’)

Jesus chooses the passage Isaiah 61:1-2:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.

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Jesus sees his identity in the *Ebed Yahweh* of the book of Isaiah, the ‘Servant of the Lord’.

(a) **Good news to the poor**

Sheik Salih in 1810 at Cawnpore heard Henry Martyn preach to the poor and went to make fun of him. But he became intrigued and became his assistant. He was given the completed Hindostanee New Testament to take to the binders. First, Sheik Salih read it and came to faith in Jesus Christ. He was baptised as [Abdul Masih](#), the ‘Servant of the Messiah’, and later became the second ordained Indian Anglican clergyman – an icon of Indian idigeneity.

(b) **Release to the captives**

Henry Martyn’s wrote to Lydia Grenfell on 15 September 1806 from Serampore, near Calcutta concerning *sati* (*sutee*), widow burning, where the widow would throw herself on her husband’s pyre:

I have just been interrupted by the blaze of a funeral pyre within a hundred yards of my pagoda; I ran out, but the wretched woman had consigned herself to the flames before I reached the spot, and I saw only the remains of her and her husband. O Lord, how long shall it be?

A law was passed in 1829 banning *sati*.

(c) **Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing**

Jesus does not just read scripture, but also announces its fulfilment now. There is an urgency to his whole message.

Now, no procrastination, delay;
later is now, tomorrow, today.

Martyn heard the urgent call and promise to give up his comfortable life here in this college and labour in India and Persia sharing the good news of Christ. David Brown wrote to him:

You burn with the intenseness and rapid blaze of heated phosphorous.

Martyn was following the pioneer, who went ahead of him, Jesus Christ. We have had the sailing Olympics in Dorset this summer, in Weymouth and Portland. When a boat cuts through the water, it leaves a ‘V’ shaped wake behind it. Christ is the pioneer and we follow him in his wake. I’ve tried to express this concept in this [prayer-poem](#):

Lord Jesus Christ,
we follow your trail,
 blazing through life;
we sail in your wake,
 surging through death.
We are your body,
 you are our Head,
ablaze with life,
 awake from the dead.

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This stress on the urgent call to mission has been heard by countless Cambridge students. In 1887, the Henry Martyn Memorial Hall was built next to Holy Trinity Church, as a focus for encouraging missionary vocations amongst students. In 1996, I founded the [Henry Martyn Centre](#) for the study of mission and world Christianity, in the Cambridge Theological Federation, at Westminster College, next to this college. There have been many Cambridge scholars who have developed the study of mission, including:

[Augustus Selwyn](#), a ‘Johnian’, whose memorial [college](#) is on Grange Road;
[C F Andrews](#), friend of Gandhi in India;
[Max Warren](#), General Secretary of CMS;
[Stephen Neill](#), missionary bishop in India;
[John V Taylor](#), General Secretary of CMS and Bishop of Winchester;
[Leslie Newbigin](#), Bishop in South India and United Reformed Church theologian;
[John Stott](#), Rector of All Souls Langham Place, London and evangelical statesman;
[Simon Barrington-Ward](#), General Secretary of CMS and Bishop of Coventry;
[Michael Nazir-Ali](#), General Secretary of CMS and Bishop of Rochester;
[Kenneth Cragg](#), assistant Bishop in Jerusalem and scholar of Christian-Muslim relations. Next year, he will be 100 not out.

All these Cambridge scholars have been influenced by Henry Martyn. What about you?

Conclusion

I believe God is still calling Cambridge students to follow Jesus of Nazareth and his saints, across the world in being authentic, integrated, sacrificial, cross-cultural mission partners and Bible translators.

I believe God is still calling young women and men to be priests and missional ministers in Britain, who sense God’s challenge to live in difficult areas, outside of their comfort zone, and who long to combine the study of classical languages with the languages of our burgeoning inner cities: Gujarati, Urdu and Hindi.

What about you?

Maybe God is calling you to be inspired to follow Jesus Christ, and one of his greatest saints, a son of St John’s College, Cambridge: Henry Martyn.