

JUST SAY THE WORD: FAITH AND STORY OF THE UGANDAN MARTYRS

Words have a tremendous impact on our lives. The words we say should be chosen with care lest they bless or harm others. I want to focus this morning, on the Centurion's understanding that God's Word never goes out in vain. God's Word will always accomplish that which God sets it out to do.

May God, give us the wisdom and knowledge to understand the difference between the words of God's Kingdom and the words of the world. Amen.

Church, we have heard today's Gospel Lesson. One day, Jesus' ministry took Him to Capernaum where the servant of a centurion – a Roman officer – was very sick and about to die. The centurion sent his men to plead with Jesus to come to his house and heal his servant.

However, before Jesus could arrive in his house, the centurion sent other men to tell Him, "Do not trouble yourself coming to my house. I am not worthy of such an honor. Just say the word and my servant will be healed."

Impressed by the centurion's faith, Jesus turned to the people who were following Him and said, "I have not seen faith like this in all of Israel."

If you will allow me, I want to connect the centurion's faith with the faith of the Ugandan Martyrs.

Matthew Segali is a Ugandan now living in Massachusetts. In his living room is mounted a painting of twenty-two young men in Ugandan traditional regalia. The expressions on their faces are of peace, trust, and joy. One of them holds a palm branch, others clasp crosses while the rest have their hands folded in prayer.

These youth were martyred in 1886 at the King of Buganda's command. Their martyrdom ignited the flame of Christianity in Uganda and other parts of Africa. In 1964, these martyrs were canonized and they are remembered annually end of May through the first week of June.

The young martyrs' story begins with the Protestant missionaries who arrived in Uganda in 1877. King Mutesa gladly welcomed them and seemed open to Christianity, perhaps because it had points of contact with his people's belief in the afterlife and in a creator God. He even allowed Christianity to be taught at his court.

Many young people were converted to Christianity and were baptized in Jesus' name. The depth of their faith became obvious during a three-year period when King Mutesa turned against the missionaries, forcing them out of the country. The missionaries returned from exile after Mutesa's death in 1884 and were pleased to find that their converts had taken it upon themselves to bring their families and friends to the Lord. Many had devoted their energies to serving and caring for the needy around them.

Among them was Joseph Mukasa, who served as personal attendant for both King Mutesa and the new king, his son Mwanga. Joseph Mukasa's witness had brought Christ to many of the five hundred young men and boys who worked as court pages in the King's palace. The young converts relied on Mukasa's leadership and faith. Mukasa earned the king's respect when he killed a poisonous snake that was about to strike the King with his bare hands. Regrettably, King Mwanga was even more unstable than his father, Kabaka Mutesa. He turned against Mukasa due to gossip through advisors, who questioned Mukasa's loyalty and allegiance to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. When Mukasa cautioned King Mwanga against trying to kill the newly arrived Anglican bishop, the king ordered Mukasa to be burned alive for being a conspirator. But before his death Mukasa, with faith in Christ, said to his executioner, *A Christian who gives his life for God*

has no reason to fear death. Tell Mwanga that he has condemned me unjustly, but I forgive him with all my heart.

Shortly thereafter, King Mwanga threatened to have all the Christian pages in the palace killed unless they renounced their faith. However, the pages had been inspired by Mukasa's faith and bravery, that they could not be intimidated by the king's coercion. There were some candidates for baptism who were yet to be baptized, inspired by Mukasa's bravery, they asked to be baptized before they died.

Charles Lwanga, was a candidate for baptism. However, he rose to the occasion and took over Mukasa's position as head of the pages and as spiritual leader. Consequently, Lwanga became unpopular with the King for protecting the boys and holding onto his faith.

Denis Ssebuggawo, one of the pages had been teaching the catechism to a fourteen year old Kizito, Mwanga's preferred page. At the king's orders, Denis was given brutal beating and handed over to the executioners, who cut him to pieces. The following day, King Mwanga ordered all the Christian believers among his pages, including Kizito to be burnt alive.

These Christian pages were tied so closely that they could scarcely walk, and I saw little Kizito laughing merrily at this, as though it were a game. One page confidently said to the priest, "Mapera, why be sad? What I suffer now is little compared with the eternal happiness you have taught me to look forward to!"

According to eyewitnesses, the martyrs were encouraging one another even as the executioners issued menacing chants. *Call on your God, and see if he can save you*, taunted one executioner. *Poor madman*, replied Lwanga. *You are burning me, but it is as if you are pouring water over my body.* In the midst of raging flames, only their prayers and songs could be heard, growing fainter and fainter. Those who witnessed this cruelty said they had never seen people die that way. History notes that the martyrs at Namugongo were not Mwanga's only victims. Dozens more Christians were killed in the surrounding countryside and some who had taught the faith were singled out for retribution.

The martyrs took a stand believing in the Lordship of Jesus Christ even when it meant defying the king Mwanga. Out of allegiance to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, they rejected king Mwanga's security that could have been theirs had they given in to his desires.

The story about the Ugandan martyrs continues to win souls for Christ. Listen now to just two of the stories from brothers and sisters whose lives continue to be inspired by the faith of these martyrs:

Vicent Mujuni, shop attendant Rubindi Mbarara

I came to see where the martyrs were killed and to pray, using them as my point of contact, for God to strengthen me for the difficult times I'm currently facing. I knew that people were coming here, but I was reluctant to trek the journey. I pray God grants me peace in my life and family. Although this is my first time to come to Namugongo, I would like to emulate the Uganda Martyrs' example of bringing people back to the Lord by consistently coming back with someone who has never been here before.

Flavia Gashirabashe, farmer Naggalama, Mukono

From the Martyrs who were killed at Namugongo, I am reminded to stand by my faith in God who is my helper, guide and stronghold. He gives me strength to go through whatever comes my way. The Lord has given me a lot in life and each time I come here, I understand Him more. I have come here eight times and since I started this pilgrimage, I am free of sickness and my four children who never used to give birth all have children now. I am a proud grandmother to six grandchildren.

Like the parable of the sower, the story of the Ugandan Martyrs won many souls for Christ. Here are young people whose whole life of faith was marked by simple, radiant, joyful trust in God—even in the face of gruesome death. They were “rich soil” indeed not just for the planting of the word in Africa but for the church worldwide.

Just like the faith of the centurion in the story and the faith of the Ugandan martyrs, our faith can unlock the power of God in our lives. May God help us to remember that no matter the problems we may face, our faith in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit is the key that unlocks God’s mighty power. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Acknowledgements:

Gashirabashe, Flavia

Mujuni, Vincent

Segaali, Matthew