

**Sermon delivered at All Saints Cathedral, Nakasero,
Kampala on 3 May 2017 in the Mid Week Service on
the topic: Who is a Martyr? A Case for St. Janani
Luwum, Acts 7:54–60.**

Opening Prayer

Let us pray.

Almighty God we thank you that you have not left us without your word that urges us to live as true witnesses for you in a dark and broken world. Thank you Lord for witnesses like Stephen, the first Christian Martyr, Uganda Martyrs, St Janani Luwum from who we may learn from their example of living faithfully until death for. Come, God, the Holy Spirit and speak to us through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Introduction: What?

Who is a martyr? What does the Bible say about Christian Martyrdom?

In the history of Christianity in Uganda, we hear the word Uganda martyrs. We hear of Martyrs day, June 3rd: which is a public Holiday. We hear of February 16, St. Janani Luwum Memorial Day, Luwum who was martyred by President Idi Amin.

Who is a martyr? What does the Bible say about martyrdom?

Who is a martyr? The dictionary defines a martyr as “a person who is killed because of his religious or other beliefs.”

Interestingly enough, the English word *martyr* is really a word transliterated from the original Greek *martur*, which simply means “witness.”

The reason why this word became synonymous with dying for one's religious beliefs is that the early Christian witnesses were often persecuted; and, or killed for their witness.

As evidence of this, consider the story of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, recorded in Acts 6:8–7:53. After being anointed as one of the first deacons in the church, Stephen immediately began doing mighty works among the people.

As is usually the case when the Holy Spirit is mightily at work and the gospel is going forth, the forces of darkness arise to hinder the work of the kingdom.

In this case, several men came to dispute what Stephen was saying, but Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, was able to refute their criticisms.

Rather than accept what Stephen was teaching, these men brought false charges against him to the Jewish leaders (Acts 6:11-14).

Most of Acts 7 consists of Stephen's speech to the Jewish leaders in which he essentially summarized the history of Israel up to their rejection of their Messiah.

At the end of the speech, Stephen utters these words, which seal his fate: "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.

Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it" (Acts 7:51-53).

Now, there was nothing untrue in Stephen's words. The Jewish

leaders were indeed responsible for turning Jesus over to the Romans for execution.

Despite Jesus' miracles and authoritative teaching, the hardness of the Jewish leaders' hearts kept them from seeing the truth about Jesus.

The Jewish leaders, upon hearing Stephen's words, were enraged and immediately arranged for Stephen's execution by stoning (v. 58). Stephen was, therefore, the first Christian martyr recorded in Scripture.

The Bible places a premium on faithful believers who pay the ultimate price for their witness.

Stephen was granted a glorious vision of heaven before he died, and in this vision, he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father (Acts 7:56) as though waiting for Stephen in an attitude of honor for Stephen's faithful service.

As further evidence that martyrs are considered precious in God's sight, the apostle John saw in his vision of the millennium those martyred for their faith reigning with Christ for a thousand years (Revelation 20:4).

The apostle Peter, who wrote the most about martyrdom and suffering for one's faith, said, "If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you... However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name" (1 Peter 4:14, 16).

There is also the word of our Lord who pronounced a blessing upon those who are persecuted for His name: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me" (Matthew 5:11).

Clearly, the biblical evidence points to the fact that those who

are persecuted and suffer for their witness to Christ (up to and including death) are pleasing in God's sight.

Given that, two additional questions arise. First, what if I'm not asked to make the ultimate sacrifice for the cause of Christ?

God doesn't call everyone to make the ultimate sacrifice, but the Bible calls all Christians to be prepared to give a defense of the hope within us (1 Peter 3:15).

The key to this passage lies in preparedness. Consider this analogy: those enlisting in the armed services should do so with the understanding that they may be called into battle and may be called upon to die in the service of their country.

This is (or should be) the mindset of everyone who joins the military. Clearly, not all enlisted men and women die in the service of their country, and not all are even called into battle.

Despite this, they are trained daily to be prepared for battle. The same goes for the Christian. We are in a state of "warfare" (Ephesians 6:12-20), and our Lord may call upon any of us to witness and even be martyred for our faith. Thus, we must be prepared!

The second question that can be asked is, given martyrdom's "special" status in God's eyes, should we actually seek martyrdom?

Biblically, we can't make a case for seeking to be martyrs for the cause of Christ. Martyrdom is a great privilege if it is inevitable, but it is not to be sought. Jesus said, "*When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next*" (Matthew 10:23).

Furthermore, reading through the book of Acts, we see that the early church continually fled from intense persecution:

Acts 8:1: That very day the church in Jerusalem began to suffer cruel persecution. All the believers, except the apostles, were scattered throughout the provinces of Judea and Samaria.

Acts 9: 25: But one night Saul's followers took him and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

In these biblical examples, we see the early Christians fleeing persecution and taking all necessary precautions for survival.

When Jesus says, “*Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it*” (Matthew 10:39), He is not calling for people to make an attempt to lose their lives.

Rather, He is calling us to be *willing* to lose our lives for His sake. Those who actively seek the path of martyrdom are not seeking it for the glory of God, but for their own glory.

As the old saying goes, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. God’s purpose in martyrdom is the glorification of His name and the building up of His church.

Question: “What should we learn from Christian martyrs like Stephen?”

A Christian martyr is someone who died for his or her faith, rather than renounce Christ. Ever since Stephen was stoned to death outside Jerusalem (Acts 7), Christians around the world have suffered and died for the sake of Christ.

Christian martyrs teach us that we can stand for God no matter the circumstances. Millions of people throughout history have willingly died for their faith. If they can do it, so can we.

In Uganda we have many cases: once such Martyr is Janani Luwum.

That does not mean we should seek out suffering or death for Christ, but it does mean that, if we are presented with the choice of “die or deny Christ,” we should be bold and cling to Christ.

Our love for God should take us as far as God’s love for us took Him—to death. Jesus prepared His disciples for persecution:

“Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven” (Matthew 10:32–33).

Martyrs show us what it looks like to stand firm in not denying Jesus.

Another lesson Christian martyrs teach us is that we will receive a reward for standing for our faith.

Revelation 20:4–6 paints a picture of the reward awaiting the Christian martyrs who die during the future Tribulation: “I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God.

They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. . . . This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection.”

Jesus attached a blessing to the suffering Christians face in this world: “Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man” (Luke 6:22).

As he died Stephen caught a glimpse of the glory awaiting him: “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56).

Interestingly, the Greek word translated “crown” in the New

Testament is *stephanos* (the source of Stephen's name).

Christian martyrs are a model of grace under pressure. They teach us how to handle persecution of any kind. Stephen died with grace on his lips: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60).

He forgave his murderers, and his forgiveness echoed that of Christ Himself (Luke 23:34).

Those who persecute Christians often have a goal of humiliating them and making them believe the hatred toward them is justified.

But Jesus told us ahead of time of their true motivation: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own.

As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (John 15:18–19).

The numerous Christian martyrs throughout history were killed because they were chosen by Christ and do not belong to the world.

Christian martyrs also provide evidence that the Bible is true. The writers of the Bible, most of whom were martyred, held to the truth of Jesus' resurrection to the very end.

Some people might die for a lie they think is true, but no one dies for a lie he knows to be false. The Christian martyrs knew what they believed was true.

When we press into knowing God personally and truly begin living for God, we will become a target for those who hate God.

The spiritual battle is real, and so are the rewards. We are

serving a real God who really loves us, who was really willing to die for us, and who really rewards us for standing for Him.

Events Prior to and After his Death

Let me conclude. Janani Luwum: Africa's Martyr, was murdered by Idi Amin for standing firm against human rights violations against the people of God: violations not approved by his Master: Jesus Christ.

On **Wednesday 16 February 1977**, news of Janani Luwum's arrest was reported by radio Uganda. It was reported in the news that Amin's government arrested archbishop Janani Luwum together with the Minister of Land and Water Resources Lt. Col. Erinayo William Oryema, and that of Internal Affairs Charles Oboth-Ofumbi.

On **Thursday 17 February 1977** at 10 O'clock news of the three had fatal accident when they were trying to escape along Nakasero road and died on the spot.

Of course, this news did not come as a surprise. Archbishop Luwum had sensed trouble and perhaps, that is why according to Bishop Henry Okullo of Maseno South diocese, Kisumu, Kenya, Janani encouraged his secretary Margret Ford, to come to him in Kisumu and delivered a copy of signed Memorandum to President Idi Amin.

He wanted Bishop Okullo to release the signed memorandum to the world press, which bishop Okullo did.

On **Friday 18 February 1977** the body arrived at the archbishop's home in Mucwini for burial from Madi Opei barracks at about 10:00am.

As the soldiers prepared to dig the grave, Aloni Oketcho asked them to take his body and burry at Church since he was a faithful servant of God.

On **Saturday 19 February 1977** after three attempts at a grave because of the stones, the fourth attempt yielded results: the grave was made and he was buried there at 3:30pm.

There is more to be said about his murder. Five men who examined the body confirm the following:

- (1) The **body** was that of **Archbishop Janani Luwum**.
- (2) It was **completely naked, wrapped in a blanket** possibly from [Mulago Hospital].
- (3) His **episcopal ring was on his finger** and his **red shocks on his feet**.
- (4) His **purple cassock was shocked in blood** and lay besides his body in the coffin.
- (5) A **hole in his throat ran below his Adam's apple through to the back of his neck**.
- (6) There were **deep wounds in both armpits**.
- (7) It appears as though his **chest had been shot in**, through the same armpit, and **the chest was bandaged**.
- (8) There was a **hole in his left abdomen** going through **his back**.
- (9) It was a **wound inflicted by something like a sword**.
- (10) His **back had been broken by cutting it with a sharp instrument**.

(11) His **lions had been cut off** and the **lower area was all bandaged**.

(12) There were **a few bruises on the left leg**.

These revelations were a nightmare.

But what was important to him such that he gave a remarkable and fearless leadership when he resisted Idi Amin's regime of dictatorship, and gross human rights violations in Uganda to the point of his murder.

At the time of his murder, Janani had provided the Church of Uganda with a glowing leadership; Bishop Festo Kivengere, while in exile from Idi Amin, highlights the fact that Janani was murdered when the Church of Uganda was at the verge of centennial celebrations of its birth through the seed of the blood of the Ugandan Martyrs.

What was it in his witness to Jesus Christ that he would want us to life for?

A man of the Bible

First, he was **a man of the Bible**. He knows and believes that it is God's word. And that God has addressed us in the Bible.

Luwum recognized the fundamental importance of the Bible for the individual Christian. And as we hear the word of God so we live the life that pleases God.

Margret Ford, his personal Secretary while bishop of Northern Uganda diocese and later when he became archbishop, wrote in her book, *Janani: the martyr*:

In October 1973, Bishop Janani Luwum participated in a mission in Soroti diocese, and the theme was 'Come now let us reason together, says the Lord [...] though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool [...]' (Isaiah 1:18).

In these verses, Margret Ford tells that, 'Janani's concern for his people [Acholi and Langi], in his own diocese and in

Northern Uganda as a whole',¹ speak of his concern for his flock who were carrying 'deep wounds'; and, 'He saw the faces of men and women, boys and girls—in the village, the office, the factory, the lavish homes on Tank Hill in Kampala, the army barracks at Malire [...] many estranged from God and from each other'.² 'His talks always concluded with a call for repentance, emphasizing the need for us to say sorry to one another and to God, our Father; and to put things right'.³

He used the Biblical message to comfort and encouraged the faint hearted. According to Ford, Janani Luwum on his pastoral visits in the diocese [Lango and Acholi region] was 'greeted everywhere with the traditional wailing of Langi and Acholi mourning their dead'.

Janani 'comforted those who mourn, encouraged the faint hearted and urged all to forgive as Christ forgave his enemies when he hung up on the cross. He offered material help when he could, but wished the Church had more funds to distribute to the growing numbers of widows and orphans'.⁴

In 1974, now the new Archbishop, Luwum, among others who influenced Festo Kivengere, 'was known for his scrupulous fairness and desire to reconcile'.⁵

Besides making clear the spiritual walk with Jesus was not a mere academic exercise: 'The church must help such people to transfer Christ from their heads into their hearts. I had Christ in my head and not my heart before I was converted. In 1948 I was "born again" and Christ came into my life. My sense of direction and values changed. Even now I am still growing in him'.⁶

¹ Ford, *Janani*, 54.

² Ford, *Janani*, 54.

³ Ford, *Janani*, 54.

⁴ Ford, *Janani*, 50.

⁵ Ford, *Janani*, 58; 63, 'always sought to reconcile the sometimes irreconcilable'.

⁶ Ford, *Janani*, 58.

He saw that preaching is nothing unless it is biblical preaching. He wanted preachers to trust God that he takes his own word and to bring home the truth to the hearers by the power of the Holy Spirit and so God used him. He was a man of the Bible.

Second, in his life and ministry Janani **knew and made it clear to his listeners that no good works are sufficient to win God's favor. Instead he pointed to the inevitable atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ.**

He was convinced invaluable and rightly that the death of Jesus Christ involves the Son of God for us; that at the cross Jesus bore the penalty of sin; and, he secured our forgiveness and our righteous.

His personal confidence was not in his piety or in his goodness but on the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross on our behalf.