

**“Manche Masemola: a Living Stone”**  
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*First in a series about Modern Martyrs*

Matthew 5:43-48

July 7, 2019

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Please read the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

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I

Marishane is the village where Manche Masemola lived. She was born there. She lived there with her parents, brothers and sister, and a cousin. She died there.

Manche had become a Christian. She was preparing for her baptism. But she confided to her cousin, Lucia, *“I may be baptized with a better baptism.”* She said, *“I shall be baptized with my own blood.”*<sup>1</sup>

Manche never made it to her water-baptism. Instead, she became a martyr, a witness for Jesus Christ. Manche’s mother and father murdered her.

II

Over the west entrance to Westminster Abbey in London are ten niches in the limestone. Since the Middle Ages they had been empty. In 1998, ten new statues were unveiled in those places.

Westminster Abbey is a place of many memorials to kings and queens, statesmen and generals, poets, playwrights and scientists. Almost all those commemorated there were English. These ten new memorials are different. These ten people were from every continent. These ten died within the last century. These ten were killed because they were Christians. These ten represent thousands of twentieth-century martyrs.

This summer, Rev. Susan and I will be telling some of their stories. We’re calling this series “Living Stones.” These martyrs are memorialized in stone. Their stories ended in death. Yet they are about living life with faith and hope.

Of these ten martyrs, Manche Masemola was the youngest. She was fifteen when she died.

How should we remember martyrs like Manche?

III

“Martyr,” simply means “witness.” Witnesses tell others what they have seen and experienced. We are martyrs. We are witnesses to Jesus. We witness to who he is. We witness to what he has done. Especially, we witness to what he has done with us,

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Madipoane Masenya, “Manche Masemola (article 2)” *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (2017). <https://dacb.org/stories/southafrica/masemola-manche2>

personally. Good news! You don't have to die to do that.

During the first centuries of the Christian movement, many did die. Their persistent witnesses about Jesus cost them suffering and, sometimes, death. The meaning of "martyr" shifted. It came to mean someone killed for maintaining a Christian belief or practice, while knowing it would likely result in their death.

The twentieth-century was the bloodiest in human history. Also, more Christians were killed because they followed Jesus than ever before, even in those first centuries. It's important we remember them. How do we remember them best?

#### IV

Listen to Manche's story.<sup>2</sup>

She was born around 1913, in the Transvaal area of South Africa. Manche belonged to the Pedi people. They had been pushed off their traditional lands by Dutch and British settlers. Manche was born into a hard life. She worked with her family around the home and in the fields. Paying for school was out of the question.

Then, she met Father Moeka. He was an Anglican priest who had recently started a mission in the community. Few among the Pedi people were Christians. They followed their traditional beliefs: communing with ancestors, dealing with spirits, and offering sacrifices.<sup>3</sup>

Father Moeka told Manche about Jesus. Manche was drawn to Jesus. With her cousin, she started going to classes at the mission twice a week. Soon she was preparing for her baptism.

Her parents were worried. Would her Christianity interfere with her work in the fields, on which her family depended? Might she refuse to marry the man they'd select for her? Might she leave them? Manche was rejecting the traditional practices and beliefs of her people. Would that put them all in danger from the spirits?

The Christian mission was dividing the community. It was undermining the Pedi culture. In those days, becoming Christian was thought to mean you had to leave your own culture behind and adopt European practices — clothing, culture, language. Nowadays we see it very differently, but that's how it was back then. Still, Father Moeka tried to be careful. He

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<sup>2</sup> I've drawn this information for numerous sources. The website of The Dictionary of African Christian Biography includes two articles about her. The first is excerpted from Frederick Quinn, African Saints: Saints, Martyrs, and Holy People from the Continent of Africa (New York, NY: Crossroads Publishing Company, 2002): [dacb.org/stories/southafrica/masemola-manche](http://dacb.org/stories/southafrica/masemola-manche). I've already cited the second article, by Madipoane Masenya. Wikipedia has an article about her: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manche\\_Masemola](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manche_Masemola). Finally, the Westminster Abbey website has biographies of each of the twentieth-century martyrs: [www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/manche-masemola](http://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/manche-masemola).

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pedi\\_people#Religion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pedi_people#Religion)

suggested that those he was teaching keep wearing their traditional clothes after their baptism. However, the students refused. They wanted to become Christians, with all they assumed that involved.

Manche was caught between clashing cultures, beliefs, and loyalties. Still, she persisted in following Jesus.

Her parents forbade her from going to the baptism classes. She went anyway. They took her to a traditional healer, claiming she had been bewitched. They physically forced her to drink the remedy he prescribed. Manche's mother hid her clothes so she could not go to class. Her mother began beating her every time she went to church. They even sent her away from the village. She persisted in her faith.

Early in February 1928, her parents took her to a secluded spot outside the village. They killed her and buried her there.

## V

How should we remember martyrs?

In the English Protestant tradition, the most influential books have been the Bible (The King James Version especially), the Book of Common Prayer, and John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. In graphic detail it tells the stories of Protestants killed by Roman Catholics.<sup>4</sup>

Roman Catholics remember their own martyrs killed by Protestants.

Mennonites remember their martyrs killed by Protestants and Catholics.

All these were people who were certain they were Christian killed by others who were certain *they* were Christian.

In Belfast, I saw murals commemorating Republican martyrs who died fighting Loyalists. A few blocks away, other murals commemorated Loyalists who died fighting Republicans.<sup>5</sup>

How should we remember martyrs? Should we?

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<sup>4</sup> John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments of these Latter and Perillous Days, Touching Matters of the Church* (John Day, 1563). The original title was, "*Actes and monuments of these latter and perillous dayes, touching matters of the Church, wherein ar comprehended and described the great persecutions horrible troubles, that have bene wrought and practised by the Romishe prelates, speciallye in this Realme of England and Scotlande, from the yeare of our Lorde, a thousande, unto the tyme nowe present. Gathered and collected according to the true copies.*" Long titles were the fashion when it was first published. Understandably, over time it became shorter over time.

See [www.bl.uk/collection-items/john-foxes-book-of-martyrs](http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/john-foxes-book-of-martyrs) and [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foxe%27s\\_Book\\_of\\_Martyrs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foxe%27s_Book_of_Martyrs).

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murals\\_in\\_Northern\\_Ireland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murals_in_Northern_Ireland)

VI

Martyr-memories are powerful. They can inspire. They can deepen loyalty and commitment. They can encourage faith.

And, they can deepen resentment. They can sow seeds of revenge. They can create more martyrs on both sides. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* worsened anti-Catholicism for centuries afterwards. The martyr memorials in Belfast keep the conflict alive, because to give an inch to the other side betrays those who died.

But Christian martyrs bear witness to Jesus.

Jesus commanded us to act with love toward our enemies. We heard this in today's reading. He did not suggest this. He did not say it would be nice. He commanded it. Treat our enemies with love!

A Christian martyr bears witness to Jesus, who commanded us to love our enemies.

Someone who used poisonous words against their enemies, or called for violence against their enemies, or killed their enemies was not bearing witness to Jesus.

Remembering martyrs in ways that make us hate those who killed them is not remembering that is faithful to Jesus.

VI

As you heard Manche's story, what did you think of her parents? What do you feel about them?

Within a decade, Christians were making pilgrimages to Manche's grave. Her mother would yell and swear at them. Such was her hatred of the faith her daughter had embraced.

Can you imagine the scene in Marishane when, forty years after murdering Manche, Mrs. Masemola was herself baptised? The old lady sneaked into the church two hours before the service. Her friend later harangued her for not telling them, and she said, "*When one keeps a tryst with God one needs no company.*" Afterwards, though, there was feasting, singing and dancing.<sup>6</sup>

Manche was baptized with her own blood. Now, her mother was baptized with water.

What would Manche have thought?

Praise be to God!

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<sup>6</sup> From an account written by Archdeacon John Tsebe, for *Seek* magazine. Tsebe performed the baptism. [www.stmark.org.za/Data/Sites/1/media/martin/pdf/seek---manches-mother-baptised.pdf](http://www.stmark.org.za/Data/Sites/1/media/martin/pdf/seek---manches-mother-baptised.pdf)