

Dear Friend

Today is the feast day of Bartolomé Las Casas, apostle to the Indies. He was born in Seville in 1474. After training as a lawyer, in 1502 he went out to the West Indies to work for the Spanish governor. Las Casas was appalled at the way the Spanish Conquistadores treated the indigenous Indian people, who were often enslaved and also fell victim to European diseases, having no natural immunity against them.

In 1510 Bartolomé was ordained to the priesthood and he used his newfound freedom to bring the plight of the Indian people to public attention. He gained much support from the church and from the Spanish authorities when he went home in 1515, and he returned to the West Indies with royal authority to protect the Indians. Sadly, in 1521, as a result of a revolt by the Indians, coupled with the strong opposition of most Europeans, Las Casas' schemes ended in failure.

Las Casas has been criticised for both exaggerating the problems faced by the local people, and also for his willingness to import African slaves so that the Indian slaves could be freed. We need to bear in mind that in the 16th century slavery was accepted as a norm.

In 1543 Las Casas became Bishop of Chiapas, in Southern Mexico, and in 1551 he retired to Valladolid in Spain where in due course he received a government pension. He never stopped pleading the cause of the Indians, even, at the age of 92, addressing King Philip II on the subject shortly before his death in Madrid in 1566.

Three days ago on 17th July, another human rights activist, John Lewis, died at the age of 80. In comparing the lives of these two Christian saints (in the biblical sense of the word) there is a common thread of upholding the rights of the downtrodden and oppressed, born out of a desire to gain proper recognition for indigenous people - in Casas' case the people of the West Indies, in the case of John Lewis, Black Americans. It is such an irony that Casas was willing to bring in African slaves in order to free the Indian people. How hard it is to see - to really see - the equality of all people, of every race, of every kind and type. John Lewis was a shining example of using non-violent protest to challenge injustice and prejudice. Although he practiced non-violence John Lewis was often the victim of violence himself, to the extent that one more than one occasion he almost lost his life. He was inspired by Martin Luther King Jr whom he met when he was 18, and at 23 he was the youngest person to speak at the same rally in Washington as King where he delivered his famous "I have a dream" speech. John Lewis was a remarkable man whose courage and determination to the cause of truth and justice marked him out as a natural leader.

May we be willing to learn from the examples of these two very different figures, who nevertheless fought with all they had at their disposal for what they knew to be right.

I will leave the last word to Martin Luther King Jr:

"I still have a dream, a dream deeply rooted in the American dream – one day this nation will rise up and live up to its creed, "We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal." I have a dream ..."

Today, 57 years after that speech, that dream is yet to be realised.

A quote I came across: "Life is short; smile while you still have teeth!"

With love and prayers - and keep smiling!

Simon