

Rowan Williams

Martyrs' Memorial, Namugongo

We are very grateful to the Archbishop of Canterbury for allowing us to use his moving poem on the Ugandan martyrs, which does, after all, restore a proper perspective — that God is God and we are not and that the loving God of our Lord Jesus Christ is worthy of the loyalty and fealty of people from any and every culture — even if it cost us our life.

*The rushes by the water
We gather every day...*

So, patiently the long reeds are laid,
smoothed, dried and rolled in homely sheaves
and stacked across the beams, too high (you hope)
for sparks. Remains of light poke a splinter
here and there through into the moving eye, but this
is a skill too practised and domestic for mistakes.

So too, like a tall reed, each young neighbour,
shaking the drops of an alien river off his skin,
is gathered, wrapped in the homely thatch,
stacked carefully, sparked into a protective blaze
whose oiled smoke builds a skilful roof
over the panic and the piled drugged anger

That beats the earth, the drums, behind the king's
long curtains. Plaited fumes weave patiently
across a bare sky, and the rain keeps off,
the splinter of the sun probes and is blunted,
rolled in the tight black thatch with the needling
sounds they will make as the smoke canopy builds steeply.

Burned men, after a while, make sounds like birds,
almost too high to hear. The roof's pitch.
When the smoke has cleared, the bare light
Enquires, Are you safe now? Whose house is this?
Your skill has burned your home. And the bird cries
From the bare sky say, Yes you will live here now.
Yes, every day.

Namugongo is the site of the burning alive of the first Christian converts in Uganda in 1886 at the order of King Mwanga.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

Williams, Rowan. (2008). *Headwaters: Poems by Rowan Williams*. Oxford: Perpetua Press