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HENRY MARTIN AND MISSION

By David Streater

On 10 January 1806, the Dutch surrendered Cape Town to the besieging British Forces which had been sent on an expedition to make the Cape route to India safe from Napoleonic aggression. With those forces was a young Church of England clergyman who was on his way to Calcutta as a Chaplain to the East India Company. Henry Martyn was his name and he had been curate to Charles Simeon in Cambridge.

A Calling Confirmed

After the surrender, like many other travellers before and after him, Martyn climbed to the top of Table Mountain. There, the sheer beauty of the scene, of the mountains flecked with the white clouds brought in by the South Easter, the deep blue of the rolling seas stretching to the Southern horizon joined imperceptibly in the haze of distance to the sky, almost overwhelmed him with its sheer grandeur. He wrote, 'I felt commanded to wait in silence and to see how God would bring His promises to pass.'

If the beauty of the Cape is in the major key, the beauty of Cornwall is in the minor. It is in the cameo beauty of Cornwall, a county of moors and mists, of fishing villages and country towns that Henry Martyn was born in 1781. John Martyn, his father, was a Methodist and that in eighteenth century terms meant an evangelical Christian who had been converted to the Lord Jesus Christ under the preaching of the Revd. Samuel Walker, the stipendiary curate of Truro.

Early Problems

Henry was not a robust boy, being on the small side, but he was spirited, and this showed itself in a violent temper. It led him into difficulties and particularly he became the target of bullies from which he was largely saved by a very close friendship with a large lad by the name of Kempthorne. Under this protection, Martyn flourished in the Classics, and after failing at the age of fifteen to enter Oxford, a year later in 1797, he entered Cambridge.

After early setbacks, through which he was once again helped by his friend Kempthorne, who had come up earlier, Martyn began to overcome his difficulties and to succeed academically. It was then that his father died. The loss sent him to prayer and to the study of the Scriptures. Kempthorne, again came to the rescue with Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*. It was by these means that Martyn came to an assured faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

To be an undergraduate at Cambridge in 1798, and attending Charles Simeon's ministry at Holy Trinity, did not make for popularity with either the authorities or other undergraduates. But it was to Trinity that Henry Martyn resorted to the ministry of Simeon who would eventually encourage him to take the Gospel to India.

The Call To Mission

The East India Company had been founded in the sixteenth century to trade in competition with the Dutch for the valuable spice trade in the East Indies. Later, the Company had moved to the mainland. There it administered certain territories, raising its own army, acting as a 'government' but with the sole motive of profit. Christianity and mission did not figure very prominently on the Company's agenda. The early Baptist missionaries in India had been forced to move from the Company's territory to that of the Danes. But with the conversion of Charles Grant in India and his

promotion to a Directorship of the Company in London, there was now a friend, who believed in the evangelization of India.

By now Martyn had become curate to Simeon but at the same time had felt the deep desire to take the Gospel to India. Simeon himself had also caught the vision, so that when Grant enquired of Simeon for someone to go, Martyn offered himself. The cost was tremendous in every way but Martyn was prepared to pay it and was appointed Chaplain to the Company. He set sail with the British Fleet and after the short interlude at the Cape arrived in India for a short but crowded six years of ministry.

In spite of being implored to remain in Calcutta and to concentrate on translating the Scriptures with the Baptists and ministering to the Company's servants, Martyn who was a brilliant linguist felt called to venture out. He went to Dinapore to the regiment there. Not only did he boldly rebuke the abounding vice of the soldiers, he reached out to the native women, camp-followers, with the gospel. The opposition was tremendous but Martyn, in spite of a frail constitution in an extremely hot and difficult climate bore it for the sake of Jesus Christ. His service was rewarded with a small but faithful group of believers.

Unsparring Dedication

From Dinapore, Martyn was transferred to Cawnpore. Here, befriended by the Sherwood family, he continued a faithful and fruitful ministry in which, in spite of much opposition, there were many converts. Hindus and Muslims, some of whom became missionaries to their own people. But the work was having a terrible effect on his health and he was ordered to rest for six months.

Far from resting, Martyn continued the ministry in Persia, discussing the things of God with the learned Muslims. In one sense, he was targeting the people, to use a modern expression, but it was done with such gracious humility that many were led to consider the claims of Christ. And this was the open secret of his ministry. Martyn did not seek to win intellectual arguments, acute as his mind was, rather, he sought to lead men to Christ. Finally, Martyn through the good offices of the British Ambassador to Persia was able to have audience with the Shah at Tabriz.

Martyn's health was deteriorating further and he made a super-human attempt to reach Constantinople. His servant, Hassan the Turk, was a man of little compassion and Martyn was pressed beyond his physical strength, arriving by some means or other in the mountain city of Tokat. There he died in 1812, strange to say in that same city where Chrysostom had died in exile in AD 407.

It is probably true to say that if Henry Martyn were to offer for the mission field today he would not be accepted. Physically, he was not strong, nor did he possess great stamina. Yet, he achieved much in his brief life as a missionary, not least in the example which he set of diligence, patience in adversity and most of all of a great Christlikeness. Simeon hung the portrait of Martyn over his dining-room fireplace and as often as he looked at the likeness of his friend, he would repeat, 'Be serious-be in earnest don't trifle, and I won't trifle'.

David Streater (at the time of publication) was Director of Church Society.