

On March 14th 1757 Admiral John Byng was executed by firing squad on the deck of his flagship. The death sentence was widely regarded as a political act designed to defend the royal government. The following year the French author Voltaire published his novel *Candide*, in which French visitors to Portsmouth are told that “in this country we find it pays from time to time to shoot an admiral *to encourage the others.*”

The events which marked today’s date in the year 1535 seem to me to have a similar cause – *to encourage the others.* Three Carthusian priors – John Houghton of London, Robert Lawrence of Beauvale and Augustine Webster of Axholme – were hanged drawn and quartered at Tyburn. They had been condemned under the Act of Supremacy of 1534, which made it treason to deny that the king was Supreme Head of the Church of England. They were the first of hundreds of men and women, Catholic and Protestant, to die because they opposed the religious policy of the government of the day.

For nearly two hundred years successive English governments were responsible for the policy of punishing those who had a different understanding of religion, with the intention *to encourage the others* to accept the government’s rulings. To a great extent the policy worked – the majority of people conformed, outwardly at least, to the official religion.

BUT – the policy had another and opposite effect: it did *encourage the others* – those others whose conscience would not allow them to conform – to witness to their faith whatever the cost. For all of them the cost was exclusion from rights and freedoms enjoyed by others, for many it was imprisonment or substantial fines, but for some hundreds it was death.

It is these, who took literally the call to follow Christ even unto death, that we celebrate today. Today’s feast began, naturally enough, as a commemoration of the martyrs who died on this date in defence of the Catholic Church, but it is one of the signs of a desire for reconciliation between divided Christians that in is now included in the calendar of the Church of England – with a wider scope and title – ‘The Reformation Martyrs of England’.

Give thanks for the witness of the Martyrs, and pray for the unity of all Christians.