

Release International's Martyrs' Day (June 29)

"And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep." (Acts 7:60).

So ends the story of the stoning of Stephen, commonly referred to as the first Christian *martyr*. Stephen was an active witness to Christ during a time when the word of God was spreading rapidly. He was arrested, brought to trial and eventually killed for that witness.

And that's what a Christian martyr is: someone who is killed *because* of their Christian faith.

The New Testament words from which our English word 'martyr' comes originally referred to the idea of 'witness' or 'testimony'. These words are frequently used in Scripture of the apostolic *witness* to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

However, this witness, and its proclamation, so often led to people being killed that by the end of the first century the Christian meaning of the word had evolved to refer specifically to someone who was killed because of their faith in Jesus.

Release's "Martyrs' Day" reminds us that Christians continue to be killed for their faith today.

In the Church Calendar, June 29 is St Peter and St Paul's Day, a date for remembering that the Apostles Peter and Paul were martyred for their faith and their witness to the gospel of Christ.

Jesus declared: "If anyone would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). Martyrdom for Christ and the gospel is the ultimate example of responding to the call to live a self-sacrificial life for Jesus.

Richard Wurmbrand, whose experience of persecution inspired the founding of Release International, wrote: "When a Christian goes to prison – and often to torture or death – the suffering only begins. The family suffers endlessly."

Release International's Martyrs' Day gives we who live in comparative freedom an opportunity to focus on the families of those who have been martyred for Jesus Christ, and to pray that the Lord will use their suffering to further his kingdom.