
Martyrdom: The Consequence of Coherence

**An Evensong meditation by the Rev. Canon David Boyd
The Feast of Ignatius of Antioch**

Have you ever watched a movie or read a book that just ends badly?

Not a story that ends sadly with a tragedy, but an ending so incoherent that leaves you wanting to throw the book or the remote across the room.

Perhaps the last line was: "It was all a dream..."

Or the TV series ends on a cliffhanger after being prematurely canceled.

Or most frustratingly, the protagonist suddenly betrays their entire development arc and makes a decision completely out of character.

We know a bad ending when we see one: when the story's last page contradicts every page before it. Today, we celebrate a good ending by remembering a saint whose story ends exactly as it began: with Christ.

Above all else, Ignatius of Antioch was a man of coherence.

His life is marked by integrity, by wholeness. His beliefs, his words, and his actions all tell one story, the story of Jesus Christ.

Tradition tells us that he was a disciple of the apostle John, that he served as the third bishop of Antioch, and was known by his contemporaries for his gentleness and courage. Around the year 107, under the Emperor Trajan, he was condemned to die in Rome. Soldiers marched him there in chains, and along the way, he wrote seven letters to the churches, letters we still have today. "I am God's wheat," he wrote, "and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found the pure bread of Christ."

This is a man whose beginning and end tell one story. Jesus' seed of wheat also tells one, coherent story.

The seed's end is contained in its beginning. It does not resist its purpose. It falls into the earth, ceases to be, and becomes what it was always meant to become. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain," says Jesus in the Gospel, "but if it dies, it bears much fruit." We must cease to be in order to become.

Ignatius' story is that of the grain fulfilled. His death was not a deviation from his life; it was its natural conclusion. Martyrdom is the consequence of coherence in a fragmented world.

To be sure, nothing about this present moment is coherent. To survive the constant contradictions and confusions of this current climate, we learn to compartmentalize. Faced with an increasingly a fragmented world, we become fragmented ourselves. We split our lives into manageable parts. We speak one truth in church and another at work, another with family, another with friends. To make nice, we separate what we believe from what we say or how we behave. We disassociate in the name of practicality and realism. Empire needs us in fragments. It can manage better us that way.

Recently, I have not been able to stop imagining a ICE agent driving home from another day of enforcing immigration law. What does he think about? I imagine him sitting in his driveway, removing his black mask and

exhaling deeply. I imagine him stepping through his door to the laughter of his children. How does he shut out the sobbing of families he tore apart that morning? He must compartmentalize; he must justify; he must rationalize. He must tell himself that the suffering he caused is the only way to protect his joy. I do not imagine this with some sense of moral superiority. I engage in this fragmentation. We all engage in fragmentation, in one way or another. Our very sanity seems to depend on it.

Rome depended on it too. Empire does not need to outlaw faith. It only needs to privatize it. Private superstition is never a threat to power. What endangers empire is coherence; when belief becomes volitional, when it begins to shape speech, direct action, and reorder life. Integrity is when faith ceases to be opinion and becomes orientation.

Rome did not feed Ignatius to the lions simply because he believed in Jesus. Rome fed him to the lions because his belief had become incarnational, enfleshed. His faith governed his behavior. His life was seamless. The empire can control many things, taxes, armies, laws, but it cannot control integrity. The early Church learned this lesson quickly. The early martyrs were not executed for having strange doctrines; they were executed for living as though Jesus were Lord and Caesar were not. The Church celebrated weakness triumphing over strength, they rescued abandoned infants and cared for the invalid, and worst of all, they refused to swear by the God-emperor's genius. Instead, their lives aligned with their creed, forming a dangerous coherence.

So how might we practice coherence in fragmented times?

How do we live as whole people when every force around us trains us to fragment ourselves?

We begin with prayer. We throw open our little compartments before God. We let grace reach into the locked rooms of the soul. Prayer is the slow unification of the divided self. When we kneel before God in honesty, we begin to sense the fractures within us: the gap between what we say and what we do, between what we love and what we serve. Prayer is where we stop pretending that those gaps don't exist. Prayer is where coherence begins.

Then comes vulnerability. To become whole, we must allow grace to reshape us. There are parts of us that must cease to be so that we can become. Pride, fear, the desperate need to control outcomes; all these fragments keep us from God. To surrender them is painful, but pain is often the price of healing. Like the grain of wheat, we must die to self-protection to bear fruit.

And coherence cannot be achieved alone. We practice integrity in community, in the Church, in the body of Christ. The Church is not a loose collection of pious individuals; it is a laboratory of integrity. Here, we practice the life we proclaim. Here, we learn what it means to be taken, blessed, broken, and given. The sacramental life enacts our integrity. Ignatius would not have understood a Christianity detached from community, from table, from flesh. Faith without embodiment is simply another form of fragmentation.

And finally, coherence expresses itself in service. It is not enough to believe rightly; we must act rightly. Words and actions must tell the same story. "Pray that I may not only speak, but truly will," Ignatius wrote, "that I may not merely be called a Christian, but found to be one." The coherence of faith and life - that is holiness! The wholeness of the person aligned with the perfect will of God.

Paul writes in Romans, "The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God." Creation groans for coherence. The whole world, all of creation, aches to see human beings whose lives line up with the truth of their beginning. In hope we were saved, the hope that all things might be gathered up in Christ, that what began in grace might end in glory.

Coherence, then, is endurance to the end. It is the perseverance of the soul to follow through on its beginning. To be planted in Christ and to fully fruit in him.

Ignatius' martyrdom was not a tragedy but a fulfillment. He fell into the earth of the Colosseum, and the Church grew. His death was not defeat but completion, the seed's story told to its end.

So it is with us.

We are invited to live coherent lives, lives that tell one story from baptism to death, lives that align belief, speech, and action into a single word of witness: Christ.

That will not make us safe. Integrity never does. But it will make us free.

May God imbue us with the grace of coherence, carrying us from beginning to end.

And when that end comes, whether in glory or in quietness, may it be said of us as of Ignatius: That our lives

told one seamless story, the story of Christ.

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*