

6 February

Fr MARTIN THOMAS

21 April 1932 – 6 February 1977



Martin Thomas was quintessentially English. At St Michael's Mhondoro, in the middle of the African bush, he would entertain visitors to afternoon tea with trimmed cucumber sandwiches in the large thatched hut that was the community room. It was as though in order to give himself fully to Africa, he had to keep a hold of his own roots. He grew up in Wimbledon, a suburb of London, where there was a Jesuit church and college. His father was an officer in the Boer war and fudged a report on a young man who fell asleep while on sentry duty, an offence for which the mandatory sentence was execution. The

man was spared. Martin must have learnt that discerning kindness at home for he was well known for it. He wore his watch upside down to enable little boys at Hodder primary school (in the UK) where he taught for a while to read the time and he never changed back when he left the school. Never a high flyer in academic matters he was gifted in practical details and saw to the drilling of two bore holes at St Michael's which gave adequate water to the growing mission. School fees at £4 a year were beyond the reach of many parents and Martin introduced a flexible system whereby they could pay in buckets of maize or bags of vegetables.

In 1974 Martin moved to St Paul's Musami. He was no longer in charge and so was free from the heavy responsibility he had carried at St Michael's. He taught in the school and each weekend would take off on his motor bike for the outstations to celebrate Mass and visit the people. In 1975 his parents died and he went home for a month's leave. It was a happy time with his family but with hindsight his sister, Dr Elizabeth Clubb, recalled a more sombre note. Martin gave her a book¹ which had a poem (*The White Horse*, about the death of St Columba) which had the lines:

...my departure is nighing.
Dying's but awaiting, my end is tomorrow.

Martin made his final commitment as a Jesuit on 2 February 1977 at Chishawasha, and the next day returned to Musami. Fr Dunstan Myerscough, who survived the shooting, later reported that on February 6, 1977, intruders with guns came to the mission at night and gathered the missionaries they could find on the road by the convent. There were four Jesuits – three priests and one brother - and four Dominican sisters. Realising what was about to happen they asked absolution of the priests. There was a burst of gunfire and the sound of running feet and then all was quiet. Myerscough had instinctively fallen with the others but was untouched by the bullets. He picked himself up and went to each to see if there was any sign of life in any of them. There was none.

Martin, the most gentle of people, died a violent death. His charm and kindness hid a steely determination. Everything – his Englishness, his family, his Jesuit vocation – all came together into a final 'no fuss' giving of his life for others.

¹ Gosse, Philip, *The Romance of Natural History*.