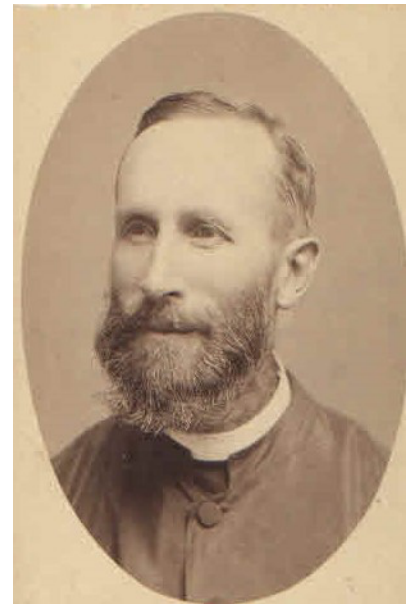


11 April

Fr **PETER PRESTAGE**

27 February 1842 – 11 April 1907

Born in London and educated at the Mount, Liège and Stonyhurst, ‘there was nothing very striking’ about Peter Prestage in his early years except that he was rather prim, holding himself stiffly upright. He joined the Society in 1860 and was ordained in 1875. Two years later he began a five-year stint at St Aidan’s and so was there to see the eleven set off for the Limpopo in 1879. He was known to be always impartial with boys, happy and glad to help others to be likewise.



In 1882 it was his time to move north and he settled in Old Tati where he met traders, hunters and other missionaries and became familiar with the country. In 1884 he moved to Bulawayo where he met Lobengula, learnt the language – and waited for the opportunity to start missionary work, something the king opposed. But Prestage got on well with him and kept up the pressure until he finally received permission to start a mission at Empanjeni, some distance south of Bulawayo. He could teach the people to plough and even preach the gospel. But it seems the people did not take his word for this and awaited confirmation from the king. Also, Fr Weld, the Mission Superior, recalled all the Jesuits from the interior to come south for a period of reassessment. Prestage was disappointed and hurried south and argued strongly for continuing Empanjeni. Weld gave way to him and Empanjeni was founded in 1887.

In 1889 tension had grown as it was clear the Europeans were planning to move into the interior after they had contrived to wrest a treaty from Lobengula allowing them to do this. It appeared wise to withdraw for a while and Empanjeni was left in the hands of the local people. But the following year the whites moved in and the Jesuits provided a chaplain for them. Prestage was assigned to accompany the Dominican sisters later. They were delayed at Macloutsie in Bechuanaland (Botswana) for 18 months.

Prestage finally reached Salisbury in 1892 and joined Hartmann in choosing a site for a mission. They finally settled on what is now Chishawasha. Prestage then went to Fort Victoria (Masvingo) where some of the sisters had a hospital. He was there when some of Lobengula’s warriors attacked Shona people in the vicinity and the Europeans reacted by deciding to destroy the power of

Lobengula although the king had kept his side of the agreement not to molest the settlers. Prestage's opinion was sought and he felt there was 'just cause' for ending the power of the Ndebele. At the same time he stood up for them when they were exploited by the local (Ndebele) police.

With the end of the Ndebele war Empandeni could be reopened and Prestage returned there to the delight of the people. But the Ndebele Rising of 1896 was the next challenge and Prestage went alone to meet the chiefs he knew and urge them to desist from joining the rising. They agreed and sent 18 representatives to Bulawayo with him to show their intention to remain neutral. The British were astonished at this 'fearless clergyman' and his act was praised in the House of Commons in London. (Possibly Rhodes too was impressed as he did the same thing four months later and went to meet the Indunas alone and unarmed). There was great drought in the following years and Prestage was hard pressed to feed the people.

In 1902, he joined Moreau in his journey across the Zambezi to find a site for a new mission. This eventually materialised in Chikuni in 1904. On returning, he settled in Bulawayo. He went to the Mozambique border to try to locate the place where Augustus Law was buried in 1880. He found his remains and brought them back for burial in Chishawasha. He then went to Gweru where he was involved finding a new site for Mzondo Mission which had proved a death trap. He identified Gokomere but it took time to move. Meanwhile he himself died of a stroke in the arms of an African companion when on yet another trip near Gweru.

There may have been 'nothing very striking' about the young Prestage, but as an older man, he was tireless and fearless in pursuing his goal of establishing the Church in Zimbabwe. He walked thousands of miles and slept in the open in a *stern*, branches cut and laid in a circle round a fire where he and his companions spent the nights. Tough as he was, he was easily taken in by others. He once bought a set of old and 'past it' oxen simply on the word of a farmer who deceived him. Another time Hartmann saw a man stealing from him, Prestage, but Prestage believed the man's denials. O'Neil said Prestage could never see difficulties ahead. His goodness was exploited.

Twice he was offered a free return ticket to Europe but twice he refused. He felt his place was here in Africa. His voice was impaired, it was felt, by his lavish taking of snuff! Fr Rea wrote, 'What was greatest of all was his working and hoping for so long without hope and finding in the end that his hope had not been in vain' (*The Shield, January, 1966, p 11*).