

5 October

## Fr JACQUES NESSER

25 July 1858 – 5 October 1936



Jacques was born in Gostingen in Luxembourg and that is important for his story. So impressed was he by meeting Fr Depelchin that he volunteered for the Zambezi Mission. He entered the Society in 1882 and was in Dunbrody to commence his studies in 1885. After ordination in 1892, he wanted to take out British citizenship but the provincial thought it was unnecessary and too expensive. In the light of what happened later, this seems like a mistake. Jacques went to the mission in Stutterheim where he did pastoral

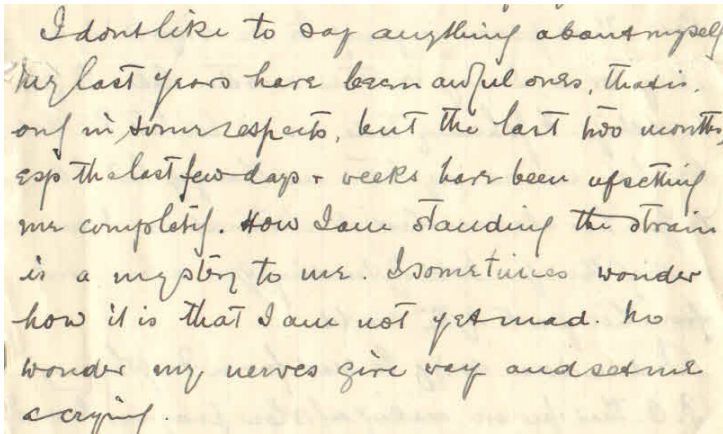
work and learnt the local language. In 1899 he went to St George's to teach and combined it with being a chaplain in the Boer war and doing pastoral work. He treated everyone equally and was talking to Earl Grey one day when a poor man beckoned to him. He left the earl to talk to the man. The earl's reaction is not recorded.

In 1914 he went to Gatooma (Kadoma) where the crisis that altered his life occurred. His obituarist summarised the thick file on the event and this is a summary of that summary! Gatooma was a 'hotbed of Anglicans' and Jacques' straightforwardness was too much for them. He talked to a group of prisoners in Shona and the jailer, who refused to attend his talk pleading he did not know the language, accused him of treason on the word of an interpreter who heard Jacques' talk, allegedly telling the inmates the English were leaving for Beira and the Germans were coming and asking them whether they would fight for the Germans.

Nesser was dumbfounded but then refused to defend himself because, he later wrote, 'I would not give the man (the interpreter) away. He would have to go to prison and would lose his position.' Jacques was sentenced to a £10 fine and 20 days. The magistrate did not believe Nesser was guilty and neither did the lawyer who defended him. But such was the prejudice against him they bowed, Pilate-like, to popular pressure. Later, a detective told another Jesuit, 'the Gatooma affair was nothing; we wanted to get hold of him and get him out of the country. ... Years ago I saw Fr Nesser talking to a German minister in Bulawayo in German. From that day Nesser was a marked man.'

Nesser heard this story 13 years later, when he was in exile in Europe, and wrote, 'I will try to find that detective and tell him I bear him no grudge. It would be good for him to know I never was a German and have no relatives in Germany. My sympathies were with England.' He was asked many times to publish the whole story of what happened and clear his name 'but he sternly refused'. He was condemned and expelled and not allowed to return even after the war. Publishing his side of the story would, he felt, compromise his return to Africa and he longed to return. If he had been a British citizen, as he had wished, it would have been harder to expel him.

'The ordeal he had to go through was crushing.' He was expelled and guarded by detectives who accompanied him all the way to Holland. He was snubbed by officials and passengers on the journey and one attacked him. Children taunted him as a 'German spy'. Forced to drag his heavy suitcase from official to official, unable to eat or sleep, standing in the cold on a tug up to midnight thinking the sailors might lynch him. He broke down. 'It was past one o'clock in the morning before I stood alone in my cabin trembling and shivering with cold. I raised my hands to my head to see if it was still there. Silent tears came down my cheeks. Alone! Alone! No one with me except my God...' He later wrote to Fr Sykes:



*I don't like to say anything about myself. My last years here have been awful ones, that is, only in some respects, but the last two months, esp the last few days & weeks have been affecting me completely. How I am standing the strain is a mystery to me. Sometimes wonder how it is that I am not yet mad. No wonder my nerves give way and set me screaming.*

The next day he asked for a doctor. There was none. But the captain came and invited him to his cabin. Nesser said to him, 'Be kind to me. I need a friend. I broke down completely and cried bitterly.' The captain was kind to him and set him free in Holland and they parted great friends.

Soon he met the Dutch Jesuits who were 'balsam to his soul'. After a good rest, he went to his home country, Luxembourg, and was happy at last among his own people.

The English provincial tried to arrange for him to go to New York, presumably for a complete break. But the British would not sign the necessary papers. It was still war time. He was greatly disappointed and returned to Luxembourg and worked as the bishop's secretary. When the war was over, he tried to go back to Rhodesia but despite his best efforts he was told he was not wanted. He had to wait until 1923 before he was allowed to return to England and he was

sent to Glasgow where he was extremely happy. He was a great pastoral worker and much sought after as a confessor. As he grew older, he kept up his visits even if it meant climbing seventy steps in the tenements.

In 1931, he went to Farm St, London, where he was in touch with Luxembourgers and he was honoured by the Grand Duchess by becoming a *Chevalier de l'Ordre de la Couronne de la Chêne*. Finally he retired to Petworth, the English province home for the elderly and infirm, where he died and was buried there in Duncton church cemetery.