

*John Coleridge Patteson*  
*First Bishop of Melanesia*  
*Martyr*

*September 20*

John Coleridge Patteson was born in London in 1827 of well-to-do parents. He was educated at a private school in Devon and then at Eton, where he proved to be a good student and sportsman. He was also deeply religious. In 1845 he went to Oxford. There he was influenced by the Oxford Movement, though he never became a “party member”. Patteson studied briefly in Germany, where he became competent in Hebrew and Arabic and showed his outstanding flair for languages. Ordained deacon in 1853 and priest the following year, he offered himself to Bishop Selwyn for work in Melanesia. He arrived in New Zealand in 1855. Two years later he was put in charge of the Melanesian Mission, and on 24 February 1861 was consecrated as the first bishop of Melanesia. Like Selwyn, Patteson was another of a new style of bishop: missionary, at the forefront of the church’s work, boldly leading the church into new areas rather than ministering to a settled diocese. It was a conception of the episcopate that caused debate in England, where the action of a Church of England bishop operating beyond the boundaries of British rule seemed strange, if not illegal.

Patteson inherited the missionary system established by Bishop Selwyn, in which young men and women from the islands were taken to Auckland for instruction during the summer. They were then returned to their islands, in the hope that they would provide some Christian input and influence in their communities. It was not very successful, and Patteson, for all his admiration of Selwyn, determined that missionary work must be done in the islands themselves and in one of the Melanesian languages.

The ten years of Patteson’s episcopate were spent opening up the islands of Melanesia to the gospel, and arranging for the education of young Melanesians, first at Kohimarama in Auckland, then from a base on Mota in the Banks Group, and then on Norfolk Island from 1867. One of his objects was to establish a group of Melanesian priests. This in itself was a novel idea. He was a brilliant linguist, but his greatest gift was that of friendship. He had no sense of prejudice about colour at all and, although he realized that the Melanesians seemed uncivilized, he had a clear vision of what they might become. Indeed Patteson seemed freer than most of his European contemporaries from the nineteenth century view of Melanesian life as something to be replaced with Christianity. He was convinced that the Melanesians could accept and practise Christianity within their own culture. He wrote: “No Melanesian is excluded now from any position of trust. . . . Some day Melanesian bishops may preside over native churches throughout the islands of the sea.”

Travel in Melanesia was always risky, and Patteson’s life was often in danger. Certainly, his health suffered in the 1860s. In the same period there grew up a considerable labour trade, as entrepreneurs in Australia and Fiji sought cheap indentured labour from Melanesia. While many Melanesians were enthusiastic travellers, some of the labour traders were unscrupulous and even used Patteson’s name to lure people on to their ships. Missionaries in particular opposed the trade, in part because it disturbed their own operations. On 20 September 1871 Patteson was murdered on the island of Nukapu. Joseph Atkin and Stephen Taroaniara, who accompanied Patteson, died a week later of wounds received at the lime. It was widely believed that Patteson’s death was in retaliation for the “slave” trading, but this is by no means certain. Patteson’s death did however ensure more rigorous regulations on labour trading, and gave strong impetus in England to the missionary work of the church. What is also clear from Patteson’s attitude is that his life was taken by those for whom he would gladly have given it.

## **For Liturgical Use**

John Coleridge Patteson was born in 1827 and came to New Zealand to assist Bishop Selwyn. He was put in charge of the Melanesian Mission. As its bishop from 1861, he opened up the islands to the gospel, and educated Melanesians to be priests and evangelists. He was a brilliant linguist, and did much to further the work of the mission by his warmth and modest charm. His murder on the island of Nukapu on 20 September 1871 was at the hands of people for whom he would gladly have given his life.

## **Sentence**

In the day of my distress I will call, O Lord, and surely you will answer me. *Psalm 86:7*

## **Collects**

God of the southern isles and seas,  
we remember with thanksgiving your servant John Patteson,  
whose life was taken by those  
for whom he would freely have given it;  
grant us the same courage in extending your gospel  
and readiness to share our life with others,  
for the sake of Jesus Christ our Redeemer.

God of the resurrection, blessed are you in John,  
first bishop to the Melanesians;  
for by his willing sacrifice  
you revealed the people's cruel suffering,  
and their right to hear the gospel.

**Psalms**                      16                      116:1-9

## **Readings**

Hosea 11:1-4	Bonds of kindness
2 Corinthians 4:5-12	Given up to death
Mark 8:31-35	For the sake of the gospel

## **Post Communion Sentence**

Set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.

*1 Timothy 4:12*