

Words from St. Paul :-

‘My sorrow is so great, my mental anguish so endless, I would willingly be condemned and cut off from Christ if I could help my brothers of Israel, my own flesh and blood.’ Romans 9: 1 – 5.

It was in January 2002, almost five months after that dreadful day when the twin towers in New York were destroyed, killing three thousand people. As we stood there on a wooden platform which had been erected for sightseers we were awestruck by the scene of devastation. Surrounding the gaping void where once stood the towers, stood the enormous skyscrapers which had somehow survived the attack. We craned our necks to look up at them. It was impossible to visualise how high the towers must have been. We were told by others standing there that the towers were twice the height of the surrounding buildings.

As we stood there in the eerie silence which was broken only by the sounds of the tractors and trucks moving the debris away, we heard the often repeated question, ‘Why did they do this to us?’ (repeat).

The question is asked in a rhetorical way. A question which cannot bear an answer. It is a cry of dereliction from the heart – a lament – an expression of despair. The same as the cry which was uttered by Jesus as he hung on the cross – ‘My God, My God why hast thou forsaken me?’

I went away from that scene with that question going over and over in my mind. ‘Why did they do this to us?’ The same question is in the air today in the wake of the London bombings. Any attempt to address the question is fraught with danger. Any serious enquiry into the causes of terrorist acts is always a dangerous road. Any serious attempt to try to wrestle with the problem of causes is likely to cause offence. But the question will continue to be in the air and eventually it will have to be faced. To simply condemn terrorists as ‘evil men who must be destroyed’ is never going to end the violence. ‘Those who live by the sword will die by the sword’ as Jesus said to Peter. Surely it is incumbent upon Christian people at the very least to attempt to understand what motivates people to use their own bodies as instruments of destruction. But not only Christian people but all who are concerned to bring to an end this global disease

must surely make a serious attempt to understand the causes of the disease.

We can take some encouragement from the recent news from Northern Ireland where the IRA has at last made a commitment to disarm. After so much killing and maiming of innocent people we must rejoice and hope for a lasting peace. There is still much to be done however in understanding the motivation behind that particular depute. There must be a spirit of forgiveness before true reconciliation can be achieved. I take no comfort from the words of Doctor Ian Paisley when he refused to forgive the IRA for past violence. ‘There can be no forgiveness without repentance’ he said. How can he expect the IRA to repent? They clearly believed that their cause was just. Jesus put no such condition on his forgiveness – ‘Forgive them Lord for they know not what they do’. He prayed for those who crucified him. Let us hope that others will understand the nature of true Christian forgiveness. The history of the religious bitterness and hatred between Catholic and Protestant must be understood and a line of forgiveness must be drawn under it before lasting peace can be achieved.

In the same way the history of the disputes and religious hatred between Jew and Arab must be understood. Both Moslems and Jews claim Abraham as their father as indeed do we as Christians. Surely this must be a starting point. Abraham had two sons, one (Ishmael) by his slave and the other (Isaac) by his free-born wife. In Genesis 17, we read that God said, ‘I will establish a covenant with Isaac, to be his God. For Ishmael I will grant a blessing and make him fruitful. He shall be the father of twelve princes and I will make him into a great nation’. So in the tradition of Islam, Ishmael takes precedence over Isaac – in fact in that tradition it is Ishmael, not Isaac, who is offered as a sacrifice to God.

Hence when St. Paul says - **‘My sorrow is so great, my mental anguish so endless, I would willingly be condemned and cut off from Christ if I could help my brothers of Israel, my own flesh and blood.’ Romans 9: 1 – 5.**

We might well imagine that in today's climate he would say:-

'My sorrow is so great, my mental anguish so endless, I would willingly be condemned and cut off from Christ if I could help my brothers of Ishmael, my own flesh and blood.' Romans 9: 1 – 5.

But what can we do in the face of such division and hatred that has existed between Jew and Arab for so many centuries. The obvious answer is 'not very much'. Yet, if we believe that it is God's will that these divisions should be healed, then we can through prayer align ourselves with the greatest power on earth – the power which fed the thousands in the wilderness – the power of the Holy Spirit. St Paul proclaims with great confidence in 2 Cor. 5:9) -

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, no longer holding men's misdeeds against them, and he has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5:19)

We could make the prayer of St. Francis our own and become instruments of peace –

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love,
Where there is injury, pardon,
Where there is doubt, faith,
Where there is despair, hope,
Where there is darkness, light,
Where there is sadness, joy.

Hate the sin but love the sinner.

Thanks be to God - Amen