

SERMON FOR THE 25th ANNIVERSARY OF THE "LOCKERBIE DISASTER AT WESTMINSTER ABBEY

Draft 4
999 spoken
words.
7 minutes

We have gathered here with the specific purpose of REMEMBERING. We have remembered (Do we ever forget?) those who we lost but as we remember them there is always another "remembering" lurking not far away. We cannot help but remember the way in which they were snatched mercilessly from us. It is what we do with this REMEMBERING that I want to think about for a few minutes before we leave for our homes and to "get on with life". I take you back to my final words in this place fifteen years ago. It seems like yesterday!

"Five days after 'Lockerbie', in the early hours of the morning, I sat at my daughter's desk in her bedroom. I was looking for a foundation on which to build my strategy for dealing with this deep wound I had received. I was drawn to the words which The Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome suffering under the Emperor Nero. -*"Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil by doing good".*" (Romans Ch12 v 21 N K J Version)

I was born in Coventry as the Nazi bombs were raining down on our city. Whilst studying at the Lanchester College of Art and Technology I often ate my lunchtime sandwiches in the ruins of the old cathedral next door. Soon after the blitz they had taken two of the charred roof beams from the rubble and fastened them in the form of a cross on the east wall placing beneath them the simple words - "FATHER FORGIVE". Little did I think then that there would come a time in my life when I was going to have to give a great deal of thought to this subject of "Forgiveness"; what it is and what it is not.

We must forgive because we are forgiven.

There are numerous ideas of what forgiveness means. Whichever we prefer it is very clear from reading the Bible, and the teachings of Jesus in particular, that forgiveness is a huge part of God's agenda. The "Sermon on the Mount" is acclaimed widely, even by those of other or no religious persuasions as being one of the very finest codes for living. In it Jesus, directly after giving us the "Lord's prayer" containing *"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors"*, gave it double emphasis and made it a condition of God's forgiveness. *"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. - But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."* (Matt. 6v14-15) For any who call themselves "Christian" UNFORGIVENESS is not an option. George Herbert, the 17th century poet and theologian put it well when he said, *"He who cannot forgive breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass"*.

The secondary infection.

When I was young there was a boy in our street who had to go into hospital with an appendicitis. The operation went well and he returned home. A few days later he had to return

to the hospital because there was some infection in the wound. He died shortly afterwards, not of the appendicitis but because of the secondary infection. The secondary damage we inflict on ourselves by harbouring anger and bitterness can be more serious than the initial wound.

How we deal with this second “remembering” is crucial. I have seen people’s lives destroyed, not by the cruel events of life but by the anger and bitterness (often justified) that they have allowed and even encouraged to take over their lives. I go back to St. Paul’s words, - *“Don’t be overcome by evil, but overcome evil by doing good”*. Anger and bitterness only hurt ourselves. The objects of our anger, if they are even aware of it, usually couldn’t care less: it even adds interest to their investment in terror.

Forgiveness and the Law.

If you beat me up outside and steal my wallet I will forgive you - BUT I won’t stop the policeman from taking you off to jail. Forgiveness is a very personal thing but the Bible clearly teaches that the civic law is God’s protection for society and that those who administer it are His servants. - Even in wicked Rome under Nero! *(Romans 13 v1-4) cf: (Titus 3v1); (I Peter 2v13-15);*

The law, either civic or international (such as it is) must not forgive: it must pursue and prosecute, within the limits of its remit, for the sake of society; but if it becomes vengeful, retaliative or vindictive it is out of order.

Breaking the circle of aggression.

It is by doing something to try to break the vicious circle of hatred and aggression that, on a personal level, we become winners.

On that fifth morning after her murder I sat in our daughter’s room remembering the previous evening’s news that it was, indeed, a bomb that had destroyed PA 103 and the cries from some quarters for revenge. I thought, “If I want someone dead because my child is dead I become no better than the terrorists: I bring myself right down to their level”. The words of Gandhi came to mind. *“‘An eye for an eye’, and the world will soon be blind”*.

The remembering of those we lost is painful but not difficult. There is little that we can do about it - we remember them with love, sorrow and pain. But the other “remembering”, how they died and at whose hands, is another matter. We cannot avoid it but it is what we do with this “remembering” that can affect, not only our personal lives but the wider world.

Conclusion:

So, “we will remember them” and even remember those who did this dreadful deed and those who have assiduously sought to hide the truth from us. We have seen the death of honour, of truth and justice and thus the death of trust but we must pursue our quest without personal malice or desire for revenge. The cross is the symbol of reconciliation. Let us seek to rise above our natural inclinations and, at least on a personal level, break the never ending cycle of aggression. - *“Don’t be overcome by evil, but overcome evil by doing good”*.

955 spoken words.