

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week -

Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> March 2021

The anniversary of the massacre in Dunblane Primary School saw me caught up in one of the most painful weeks of my Ministry. One of the wee victims was Ross whose family had moved from Ayr and my Congregation only nine months before.

And each year, on 13<sup>th</sup> March, I visit his grave in Ayr Cemetery.

The sorrow of the Dunblane families, even twenty five years on, is still very raw – the sorrow of broken hearts, shattered homes, that will darken all their days until life's end.

For this was no normal bereavement.

There was no prelude of illness; no sudden road accident, no apparent danger on an ordinary Wednesday morning in Dunblane – and so it seemed.

And it is right to share their sorrow still, their grief.

You and I are part of Dunblane and Dunblane is part of us.

The shared sorrow in the weeks after the Dunblane shootings united the nation. I was so touched to see The Queen and Princess Anne laying flowers at the school gates; and John Major, the Prime Minister, and Tony Blair, the Leader of the Opposition coming together.

In all the atrocities which have happened since Dunblane, we have glimpsed our common humanity; that we are united by being members of the human race and that that matters more than the differences of temperament and politics and religion and culture and history which will always divide us.

I wish to God that we could live the conviction that those who suffer in Yemen and Iraq and Syria and Jerusalem are our brothers and sisters.

I wish to God that we could live the conviction that those who disagree with us are not our enemies but our fellow human beings.

I wish to God that those whom we don't like are not to be hated or demonised or feared, for they are our fellow human beings, and we are part, indissolubly part, of common human life together.

As I drove home to Ayr the day after the Dunblane shootings after my initial visit to Ross' family, all the way down the road, I could not stop thinking that what had happened on that Wednesday morning was a terrible demonstration of the fragility of human life.

One moment, waving goodbye, and then never again.

One moment, setting out down the school corridor for games, the next moment a mediaeval painting of hell.

One moment, just an ordinary Wednesday morning, the next moment, Dunblane the worst place in the world.

How insubstantial is the thread that holds us to life.

The Scriptures are right, "All flesh is grass."

We are here for a season and every day is so, so precious.

And the pity of it is that we waste so much of these brief lives of ours on things that do no good.

That so much of our time is spent concentrating on things that are of no consequence whatever.

We waste time in silly arguments; we hold grudges; we nurse resentments, and all the while we are living as shadows of what we are meant to be.

The Sunday after Dunblane was Mothering Sunday, and I shall never forget seeing folk in Church whom I had never seen before or who had not been for a long time. I could see parents holding their children even closer than normal.

Dunblane reminds us of what is real and true and lasting.

And all during those weeks, again and again and again, on all sides, I could hear the question, "Why?"

Such an event raises so many questions – so many important and insoluble questions:

About God;

About evil;

About human freedom;

About forgiveness;

About the sort of society which produces such a person as Thomas Hamilton who obviously wanted to make his mark and perpetrated the deed;

About violence, not least on television.

About the use of guns and so on and so on and so on.

Where does our religion fit in?

Shall we try to worship and love a terrible being who plans the destruction of innocent five year olds?

Shall we say, as many said after Aberfan, and as the journalist Polly Toynbee said on the radio after Dunblane, "For me this is the final clarification that there is no God, or if there is, that God is one I want nothing to do with."?

Shall we take refuge in theology and persuade ourselves that what happened is all to do with freewill and the irrational nature of evil and the doctrine of the Fall of Man and that

professors of theology must be able to understand it so there is bound to be an answer somewhere?

Or shall we, as I did and encouraged others to do, rage and weep and lament before God?

Read the Bible and so much of it does – rage and weep and lament and pray.

Shall we commit ourselves to the God who meets us in the unlimited, unutterable love of Jesus Christ and His Cross, and somehow trust that He is at the very heart of things?

My friend, the Revd Colin MacIntosh, who was Minister of Dunblane Cathedral at that time, was asked by a TV reporter, “Where was God?”

And Colin’s answer was brilliant and the most theologically profound answer that anyone of us could have given.

He said, “God was there in that gym. God’s heart was the first heart to break.”

God, in Jesus Christ His Son, has shown us that He suffers with His people.

God was in that gym in that darkest hour.

That is our only hope.

And God has been in that Dunblane situation all down twenty five years – in all the great outpouring of sympathy and practical help that came from all around the world in the weeks following the atrocity; in the building of the Dunblane Centre in the memory of the victims, a place which today is used by the children and young people of the town in a whole range of activities; in the tightening of the Gun Laws in the United Kingdom.

In the years that have followed the Dunblane tragedy, the people of that community have responded magnificently, their grief matched with courage and resolution.

They are determined that no outrage will defeat them and they have worked at ensuring that Dunblane will not just be remembered for that hellish day. Many of the families who lost children are helping parents in the USA whose children have been killed in gun massacres in schools.

Dunblane will always be a place to be remembered because of those young lives cut short, but also a place of courage and cooperation and hope.

And I, for one, can only have confidence in a kind of religion which speaks of darkness and mystery and depth; and of light and love and light shining in the darkness so that the darkness could not put it out.

From the darkness of that school gymnasium, there now shines a light that no one can extinguish.

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister