

was no better – ‘the number of deaths at the hands of his regime in the Gulag and elsewhere was far greater even than in the Holocaust.’ There is criticism of the British in their blanket bombing of German cities and the use of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki, if not Hiroshima, has been described by one Christian thinker as ‘morally appalling.’² Winston Churchill said of the first test of the atomic bomb, ‘This atomic bomb is the Second Coming in wrath.’ The tail gunner of the Enola Gay described the experience of Hiroshima as ‘a peep into hell.’ After the Cold War, we have seen horrors with the break-up of Yugoslavia, strife in Israel/Palestine, genocide in Rwanda and East Timor and chaos, if not disaster, in Iraq. Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

The Enlightenment was a period of some kind of sanity following the ‘wars of religion.’ Now in the twenty-first century we ask, ‘Are we back to where we started?’ The final communications to the 9/11 hijackers are a form of ‘spiritual direction’:

Purify your soul from all unclean things. Completely forget something called ‘this world’....Bless your body with some verses of the Qur’an, [bless] the luggage, clothes, the knife, your personal effects, your ID, passport and all your papers....Be happy, optimistic, calm because you are heading for a deed that God loves and will accept....Smile in the face of hardship, young man, for you are heading toward paradise...Remember this is a battle for the sake of God....Either end your life while praying, seconds before the target, or make your last words: ‘There is no God but God. Muhammad is his messenger.

Jesus spoke of countries fighting each other, of kingdoms attacking one another. He spoke also of earthquakes. If we ask the question, ‘How can we speak of God after the Holocaust?’, then can we not also ask the question, ‘How can we speak of God after the tsunami?’ How can we speak of God after the millions who died in the

² Forrester, D B *Apocalypse Now* p24

Gulag? How can we speak of God after the 800,000 Tutsis died in Rwanda, with priests and religious leaders helping in the slaughter and the UN in neighbouring nations doing nothing? How can we speak of God after Srebrenica, in which hundreds were massacred while the world watched, impotent and helpless? How can we speak of God after the hundreds of thousands killed by the tsunami? I find the words of George MacLeod unsurpassable:

*But creation is not enough.
Always in the beauty, the foreshadowing of decay.
The lambs frolicking careless: so soon to be led off to slaughter.*

*Nature red and scarred as well as lush and green.
In the garden also:
always the thorn.
Creation is not enough.*

We live in an age of terror. We live with battles and conflicts around us and earthquakes too.

Jesus spoke of the destruction of the Temple: ‘You see these great buildings? Not a single stone here will be left in its place; every one of them will be thrown down.’

Jesus was speaking to the disciples of a time when their world would seemingly fall apart. The understanding of the disciples of their faith, the world which they knew and had grown up with, and their need and appreciation of order and personal safety are all challenged, no, threatened by Jesus’ saying that the Temple will be destroyed. He foretold that their world would fall apart. Jesus told the disciples that there would be no security, that their religion would be undermined and that the familiar would pass away. They might even be killed. Anarchy would be loosed upon the world.

The words of the psalmist come to mind:

*God is our refuge and our strength,
in straits a present aid;
therefore, although the earth remove,
we will not be afraid.*

In our first lesson, we heard of the despair and personal suffering of Hannah, who had not given birth to a son. The story of ‘the barren woman’ is a common one in the Bible. It is a symbol or metaphor for life in this world. It says that though the events that befall us may cause us despair, pain and hardship we should remain faithful to God. Hannah prayed to God continually and God did not abandon her. Though her world was falling apart because she had no son, the message is that God can bring life out of the most barren and soul-destroying events of life. Eventually, Hannah gives birth to a son, Samuel, and is able to pray, ‘How joyful I am because God has helped me.’ This is a story, a symbol, a metaphor, of God being able to do what seems otherwise impossible. God is able to work in the most despairing of situations. Though the earth remove, we will not be afraid.

In a time of terror, what can Christians do? We have a faith that tells us that we have nothing to fear. We are a forgiven people. Christ on the cross forgives us our sins: ‘Father, forgive them...’ Forgiven, we can go into the Most Holy Place, into God, says the author of Hebrews. We have nothing to fear. Professor Duncan Forrester has written:

For Christians in a time of terror, reconciliation, the restoration of just and loving community, is the goal, and forgiveness is the way to that goal.³

At the end of the Second World War, the great twentieth century, Karl Barth, wrote ‘A Speech of Christ addressed to the Germans’:

Come unto me, all you unpleasant ones, you bad Hitler boys and girls,

³ Forrester, D B *Apocalypse Now* p 109

you brutal SS soldiers, you wicked Gestapo scoundrels, you sad compromisers and collaborators, all you herds of people who have patiently and stupidly followed your so-called Führer! Come unto Me, you guilty ones and you accomplices, who now receive and have to receive what your deeds are worth! Come unto Me, I know you well but I do not ask who you are and what you have done. I only see that you are at the end of your rope and must start all over again whether you like it or not. I want to refresh you and precisely with you, I now want to start anew from the very bottom. I am for you! I am your friend!

The prophetic word in a time of terror is not to seek to isolate and so further provoke those who oppose us, those who feel 'attacked' by us. The prophetic word is to build peace through love, understanding and compassion with those who oppose us. It is not a pleasant word to hear. If we want peace, then we must build it. From the invasion of Iraq to the present day, billions of dollars have been spent on that country and too many people have been killed. Had the same amount of money been spent on the country instead of invasion is it possible that the world would be a safer place? Are we prepared to spend as much of our resources on peace without conflict as we are on reconstruction following conflict? The prophetic word is to build peace and to offer the forgiveness of Christ. Martin Luther King, Mahatma Ghandi, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu are all leaders who spoke of and practised forgiveness.

Mary McAleese, the former President of Ireland, tells the story of Gordon Wilson:

It is a rare person who arrives at [a] state of perfect spiritual serenity. I suppose they are saints of sorts...the kind of people in whose presence we intuit the nearness of God because they bring their best friend everywhere with them. God does not accompany them as a bodyguard or go in front of him like a tank clearing a path. He accompanies them like a soprano's pure voice accompanies a song.....

One such was Gordon Wilson. He was a man so practised in the discipline of love that when his beautiful daughter Marie died, hard and cruelly, at the slaughter that was the Enniskillen bombing, her hand in his as she slipped away, the words of love and forgiveness sprang naturally to his lips as a child's eyes are drawn to its mother. His words shamed us, caught us off

guard. They seemed so different from what we expected and what we were used to. They brought stillness with them. They carried a sense of the transcendent into a place so ugly we could hardly bear to watch. But he had his detractors, and unbelievably his bags of hate mail. How dare you forgive? they shouted. What kind of a father are you who can forgive your daughter's killers? It was as if they had never heard the command to love and forgive anywhere before. It was as if they were being spoken for the first time in the history of humanity and Christ had never uttered the words, 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.' As one churchgoing critic said to me on the subject of Gordon Wilson, 'Sure the poor man must have been in shock.' As if to love and offer forgiveness is a sign of mental weakness instead of spiritual strength.

We live in a time of terror. In such times, the prophetic word is to speak of peace and seek to build it and to pour into the peace effort as much as we would into conflict and restoration. In a time of terror, of bloodshed and hatred, the prophetic word is to build communities of justice and love, of understanding and compassion across the divide and, where it is necessary and it is always necessary, to offer love and forgiveness; to invite love and invite forgiveness. Prophetic words are rarely popular. In being prophetic, the Church risks being ridiculed and rebuked. In that case, the Church will be following in her Master's footsteps.