

SUNDAY WORSHIP - BBC RADIO 4

ST DAVID'S CATHEDRAL CARDIFF

FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI – 18 JUNE 2017

HOMILY OF ARCHBISHOP GEORGE STACK

The tragic fire at Grenfell Tower in London on Wednesday has devastated the lives of untold numbers of people. The death of so many who were trapped and died in their flats is almost impossible to imagine. The injuries suffered by those who are still in hospital will need the dedicated and skilled care of doctors and nurses for many months, if not years, to come. The emotional wounds of those who managed to escape, or have to come to terms with the death of their loved ones, will be a lifelong pain to bear. The public enquiry will eventually seek to answer the question “How could this happen?” “Who or what is to blame for such a tragedy?” It will no doubt come up with very scientific answers as to what went wrong. But there will be deeper questions in the minds and hearts and on the lips of all who try to make sense of suffering on such huge a scale. “Why does God allow this to happen?”

There is no easy answer to that inevitable question, especially in the immediate aftermath of such a tragedy. For the followers of Jesus

Christ, the only ray of hope we have is that he himself knew the depths of innocent suffering and plunged into the depths of agonising death. In his anguish and pain he cried out on the cross “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”. How desperate the cries of those who tried to escape the fire must have been. How traumatised are those witnesses who saw people throwing themselves from windows in an attempt to escape the inferno to escape.

One of the many telling images of the bombings of the Second World War came in the picture of a church which had been destroyed with just one thing remaining – a crucifix with the arms of Jesus blown away. On a smaller scale, vandalism both in churches and cemeteries often focus on chopping off the hands of Jesus. Christians respond with the words of the 16th century Saint Theresa of Avila: “Christ has no body here on earth but yours. No hand but yours. No feet but yours”. That image continues to speak to me of the length to which God goes to be with us in our trauma and suffering. “Where is God in the midst of human suffering?” ... “ “Here” says Jesus with arms outstretched on the cross, even if those arms are now broken and blown apart.

Today the Church keeps the feast of Corpus Christi - the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ. It commemorates the gift that Jesus made of himself at the Last Supper, the night before he died. When he took bread and wine and blessed it and broke it and gave it to his apostles he said "My Body given for you. My blood poured out for you". In a symbolic and sacramental way he gave them a sign and a promise and a hope that through his death he would bring them to new life and nourish that life in the Eucharist. His words echo down the centuries to this present, painful day. "Do this in memory in memory of me".

One of the ancient descriptions of the Eucharist is "The Breaking of Bread". In the paradox of the suffering and death of Jesus lie the promise and the hope of new life, a risen life with Christ. The breaking of the host at Mass is a symbol of the brokenness which lies at the heart of a tragedy like this week's fire, a reminder to us all of the fragility of life itself and the vulnerability of every human endeavour. It is in and through this bread which is broken for us that we are drawn into communion with the risen Body of Christ, and bound in communion with one another, especially in the face of tragedy

Who could fail to be moved by the acts of heroism of those who rescued people from that blazing inferno? Is it too much to say the compassion of the people of London and all over the country in providing food and shelter, care and comfort is itself a sign of communion in that multi cultural city that is London? Compassion is a universal quality of all humanity, it is a word that means “suffering with” and that is certainly how people feel when they try to comprehend the enormity of the tragedy which has struck so many lives, and reach out in sympathy and with help to those who have suffered so much.

All over the world today, on this feast of Corpus Christi, children will be receiving Jesus in Holy Communion for the first time. First Communion Day is a day of great happiness and joy for parents and children alike. Indeed, later this morning in this Cathedral we shall celebrate First Holy Communion for twenty children. But another description of the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is “Viaticum”. That description means “Food for the Journey” and is given to the dying in the Last Sacraments. Today we pray that those who have died may experience the vision of God for which they were created, and in their suffering will be united with the crucified Saviour who suffered death that all might live.