

# **St. Ninian's Parish Church**

## **Sunday 10th June 2018**

*Psalm 130; Mark 3: 20 - 35; 2 Cor. 4: 13 - 5:1*

*Almighty God, your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ is the light of the world. May your people, illuminated by your Word, shine with radiance of his glory, that his love may be known in the world as he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one God, now and forever. Amen.*

It has been just over a year since the fire at the 24-storey Grenfell tower block of public housing flats in the North Kensington area of London. The anniversary has been marked by the beginning of a public inquiry, and by the publication of two reports by faith groups, one Christian and one Muslim, about the circumstances of the fire and the response to it.

Listening to the opening statements from the public inquiry and the harrowing commemoration testimony the inquiry has heard from the families and friends of the 72 people who died, it is clear that the inquiry has many questions to answer not just about the fire and the response to it, but about the wider societal and institutional circumstances within which it took place.

An extract from the report with regard to the voluntary sector response from the disaster relief charity Muslim Aid articulates some of the questions that require answers. Here is what the report says in one section.

*While the precise circumstances may prove unique, the disaster also highlighted deep-seated societal and institutional stresses. Factors that exacerbated the crisis are common to other disasters, in both the developed and the developing world. The most deprived in society are hardest hit in emergencies, a reality the Grenfell disaster demonstrates in our own backyard.*

*Official bodies charged with leading emergencies are often overwhelmed, incompetent or worse, and this is not the first instance in the UK where serious mistakes were made by those responsible for managing a crisis, as the families and friends of the victims of the Hillsborough disaster will testify.*

*With the effects of climate change, the threat of terror attacks and high levels of inequality in the UK, there are good grounds to believe that large-scale disasters are becoming increasingly likely; that marginalised communities will suffer disproportionately; and that the bodies charged with responding will often be ill-equipped to do so. All of this suggests that the lessons of Grenfell should be learnt quickly.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> *Grenfell: one year on, a review of the voluntary sector response* page 23

The public inquiry will be a long process, but one year on from the fire there is already at least one conclusion that can be drawn. The fire affected the most marginalised people in British society, and as in so many other cases in this country and across the world we can be absolutely certain that the families and friends of those who died in the fire will never, ever stop demanding answers to the questions that they have with regard to the circumstances of the fire.



No matter what the report of the public inquiry states, if it does not satisfactorily answer the questions the survivors have, the relatives of the dead will continue to campaign and demand answers until future inquiries produce them, even if that takes the rest of their lives.

We know this because that has been the case with so many others tragedies in the past. It took decades, but the families of those 96 people who died at Hillsborough never stopped campaigning for justice until they felt they had received what was their due. So too the family of Stephen Lawrence; the black teenager murdered in London in 1993. That family has never stopped campaigning for justice.

There are many other tragedies where the conclusions of initial inquiries have been overturned as a consequence of persistent campaigning by the families and friends of those involved over many, many years. For example, the 1994 Mull of Kintyre RAF Chinook crash, and the deaths of recruits at Deepcut army barracks between 1995 and 2002.

What is true in this country of the sustained, committed enduring demand for answers from relatives when tragedy strikes, is true also around the world. For example, the Bhopal gas tragedy in India that caused at least 3,787 deaths, and the 70 children who died at the Okawa primary school in Japan following the 2011 tsunami there.

Often dismissed wrongly as irrational, grieving and unable to move on, the truth is that those bereaved in a tragedy almost always - almost always - feel themselves to be on the outside of investigations and inquiries and always - always - have an acute appreciation of when facts are being hidden, truth is being covered up and justice is being denied.

That is true even on a national scale. We can be certain that whatever the rights and wrongs of the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians, whatever anyone believes on any side about the history of the conflict, without a doubt the Palestinian people will never, ever give up their campaign for justice. They have been campaigning since the establishment of the State of Israel 70 years ago, and it is certain they will continue to do so, not matter what they have to endure, for decades and decades to come until they feel that the truth is told, the facts revealed, and that they have received justice.

It is universally the case that victims never, ever give up their demand for facts, for truth and for justice, no matter how long it takes, until *they alone* are satisfied with the answers they have been given. Even in the very early days of the public inquiry into the Grenfell fire there is no doubt that the same will hold true for the relatives of its victims. The demand for facts, truth and justice will never, ever go away, until satisfactory answers have been given.

The reason why it often takes so long - decades in most cases - for people to hear the truth, to be given answers and to receive justice is because at the heart of cases like these - and this is true of the Grenfell fire - there is a division between those people who are on the inside of our society - those who have a large stake in the current way society is structured - and those who are on the outside of society, those who feel pushed to the margins and who feel they have only a small stake, if any, in the current structure of society.



The insiders often believe they are powerful enough to fob off the outsiders with cheep answers and deflected blame. But, the outsiders, although they are often voiceless and nameless, when tragedy strikes demand to be heard, and demand to be let in to the houses of justice, power and authority from which they have too often been denied access. That is the division that is exposed when disaster strikes: the division between those on the inside of the houses of justice, power and authority, and those on the outside.

God knows that this is true. God knows that this is true. This morning's Gospel reading is a story that describes the way that God's kingdom is a kingdom that overturns this division in order to highlight the injustice between those who are on the outside of power, justice and authority and those on the inside.

Read the very first words of our Gospel reading. "Jesus entered a house..." Jesus went inside. The next words are, "and once more such a crowd collected round [him]..." Jesus has gone inside and has taken the nameless, faceless crowd with him.

Then the next words, "When his family heard of this, they set out to take charge of him; for people were saying that he was out of his mind." He was out of his mind - for going inside a house? Which people were saying he was out of his mind? The next words tell us. "The doctors of the law, too, who had come from Jerusalem, said, 'He is possessed by Beelzebub...'"

In Jesus' day where did power, justice and authority lie? It lay in three places. It lay with Rome, we'll come to that, it lay with the religious authority in Jerusalem - the doctors of the law - and it lay with families. God help you if the doctors of the law took against you and cast you out. God help you, also, if your family did.

Returning to the Bible story. Jesus engaged the doctors of the law in conversation - the doctors of the law who called him mad for no other reason than he went inside a house and sat down with a large nameless, faceless crowd. Mark, the Gospel writer, says that Jesus told them a parable. What was the parable about? It was about a household guarded by a strongman and the need to tie the strongman up if someone ever wanted to get inside the strongman's house from the outside.

Having told us that, the next thing Mark says is this, "Then Jesus' mother and his brothers arrived, and *remaining outside* sent in a message asking him to come out to them."

Those traditional authorities that were traditionally on the inside of society making up the rules, executing justice, holding power - the doctors of the law and the family - have seen their position reversed: someone has broken in to their house, and chucked them out.

"Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" said Jesus, 'and looking around at those who were sitting in the circle about him,' that is the nameless, faceless crowd, 'he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister, my mother."



The Gospel reading this morning, when read in the 21st century from the point of view of those on the inside of society is initially somewhat perplexing and strange: why would Jesus reject the family who love him? Why are the doctors of the law and his family calling him mad? Why are we told such seemingly insignificant details about who Jesus going inside a house, and his family waiting outside? What is the meaning of this confusing story about Satan driving out Satan and a household that cannot stand, and a strongman being tied up? What does this all mean?

These are all good questions, and they are all answered when we read this passage from the roof of Grenfell Tower, or the terrace of Hillsborough stadium, or the mountainside of the Mull of Kintyre, or the ruined school of Okawa, or a barrack building at Deepcut. Read this passage from these places and you will see clearly how Kingdom of God is about overturning the established order inclusion, it is about the inclusion of those traditionally on the outside in power structures - and if those traditionally on the inside wont let them in, then they will be pushed out.

The Bible readings this morning are as always taken from the Revised Common lectionary, as I explain every week in the inside front-page of the order of service. This morning's third lectionary reading is Second Corinthians chapter four verse 13 to chapter five verse one. When you read it, it is a bit of a strange reading. But, if you imagine that Paul is writing to a group of people who are living as outsiders on the margins of their society, it becomes so much clearer...

*Now to the one who can keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory, jubilant and above reproach, to the only God our saviour, be glory and majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and for evermore. Amen.*