

Midnight Communion
Christmas Eve 2013
St Anne's Cathedral, 11pm

Christmas sermon by The Rt Revd Harold Miller, Bishop of Down and Dromore

At more or less precisely this moment, 11.20pm, a most unusual, indeed, unique, Christmas Eve service is taking place on a pavement in Sheffield, in the open air. The place for this communion service is the very spot on which Alan Greaves, a man of 68 years of age, was battered to death. Alan was walking alone, on his way to play the organ at midnight mass in St Saviour's parish church where he served. Alan was quite simply an innocent victim of a totally unprovoked and brutal attack. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The story of this unusual midnight communion taking place on a street in Sheffield was in last Sunday's Observer. But the headline is not, 'Midnight Mass to be held on a pavement', unusual though that is. The headline is much more striking. It reads: 'One year after Christmas murder, a widow's simple plea: Forgive them.'

Alan Greaves' wife of forty years, Maureen, who happens to be a Church Army sister, says that she, with their two daughters and two sons, were left, in their own words, 'utterly heartbroken and bewildered', as that sat by the bed of their loved one, who died of his horrific head injuries on 27 December last year.

The death of Alan Greaves was so poignant in the Christmas news of 2012, that a new carol, The Bethlehem Star, was written in his memory by Bob Chilcott, and will be sung on that pavement at that service tonight as we meet here in St Anne's.

But I wonder how you and I react when you hear a widow who says of people who attacked her husband with an axe handle and a hammer, 'Forgive them'. Perhaps it reminds us of similar sentiments expressed by Gordon Wilson after his beloved daughter Marie was killed in the Enniskillen Remembrance Day bomb. It is, on one level, an outrageous thing to say, and on another level, a deeply Christ like sentiment. For some people, it will make them angry, some will pity Maureen Greaves, some will reckon she isn't thinking straight. Listen to some of her words, quoted in Sunday's Observer:

'I don't want anyone to think that...I didn't want them to be punished. I just think they are two men who did an evil thing. I don't know why, and I don't think they know why.....
Forgiveness means you are not seeking retribution or revenge. Forgiveness is recognizing we are all in the same boat. We're all the same, not perfect.'

One of the reasons why that story resonated with me this Christmas is that I was recently very deeply impacted by seeing a film made by a cross-community group of people in Lurgan and Portadown, perhaps two of the most divided towns in Ulster. They had taken themselves to an Amish community in Pennsylvania to explore how

the Amish people practised forgiveness, after the much publicised shooting of five children at a school in Nickel Mines in 2006, and the very challenging exercise of forgiveness by the Amish community. A story which deeply impacted me in the film was of a man who was driving his truck one night, when he fell asleep at the wheel. He was suddenly wakened with a thud as he hit an Amish buggy, and discovered that there had been a young girl of 8 years of age in it who now lay dead on the road behind him.

What he found was that the family immediately sought him out, came to visit him, and their first words were, 'We forgive you'. When the funeral of the young girl took place, five friends lined up and said to the man, one by one, 'I forgive you'... 'I forgive you'... 'I forgive you'... 'I forgive you'.... 'I forgive you'. Again, probably like you, my mind was reeling when I heard that story. I began to think 'They've just been taught to say that'. Then I discovered that part of what the Amish learn is to put forgiveness into words first and then live into it and work it out in all the other aspects of the situation.

And then I reflected, as the film continued, in my mind: Is that not a good and Christ like thing? When the disciples were given the Lord's Prayer, they had just said, 'Lord, teach us to pray'. And what does Jesus teach them to say? Words which we would never have made up:

'Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.'

And, as though he knew it would be hard for us, he takes time, in Matthew's Gospel, to explain it:

For, if you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others your sins, neither will your Father forgive you your sins.

In this province it seems easier at times to teach sectarianism and unforgiveness than it is to teach the way of Christ.

Each year, a bishop writes a Christmas message. Sometimes it sees the light of day, other times, it does not. This year I reflected on The Values of Christmas, and the first value was forgiveness. Now, the word 'forgiveness' does not appear in the Christmas readings, but there is a wonderful verse just after the Christmas Gospel ends, in John 1:16, which sums it all up for me:

From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.'

That means that God, like those Amish people, moved towards us in love when we deserved to be condemned.

That means that we did nothing to deserve it. Indeed, we deserved his anger and wrath.

That means he opens his arms of mercy towards us when we cannot even forgive ourselves.

That means he says those words 'I forgive you' and lives into it as he invites us to receive his outrageous statement that forgiveness is always available in Christ.

But it also means that the forgiving grace of Christmas challenges us to live in a different and a dangerous way, receiving and loving others who have hurt, offended and damaged us. That's a big challenge for Northern Ireland in the days of Haass and especially for those who dare to receive the forgiveness of Christ and who, as his disciples are required to pass it on to others.

I have given you two pictures tonight: Maureen Greaves and that midnight service on the pavement in Sheffield, and the story of the Amish Community at Nickel Mines. I leave you briefly with one more:

In 1999, I had the privilege of being one of the first western people to go into South Sudan, after many years of conflict, to a place called Maridi. We were there at a tricky enough time. People were returning as refugees, and the forces of the Muslim north were still bombing, not least targeting cathedrals made in the shape of the cross. I will never forget the moment when I asked Bishop Joseph Marona, later to become archbishop, Do you not feel bitter when you see what people have done to your people? And his answer surprised me: 'No', he said, 'that is not the way of Christ, and we are to be disciples of Christ'. That ended the conversation!

May the Lord grant to each of you the joy of forgiveness, the freedom of forgiveness, and the grace of forgiveness this Christmas time, when the Son of Righteousness came and comes to each of us with healing on his wings. Amen