

## **SERMON**

*preached at Chelmsford Cathedral  
at 11.15 am on Sunday, 18 June 2017  
by Nicholas Henshall*

If the Gospel cannot speak good news to tragedy, then its credibility as good news at all is seriously under threat. But let's decode some of the tragedy - our current hysteria about terrorism seems bizarrely displaced for anyone over 50 in the UK who grew up through what we euphemistically called "the troubles". Remember today that the vast majority of terrorist incidents in the UK in recent years - failed or otherwise - have been committed by dissident Irish republicans. It's simply that we are used to that and prefer to give publicity (in every sense) to ISIS - again, bizarre, because of course by giving them publicity we give them on a plate exactly what they crave in committing these atrocities in the first place.

The far less sensationalist approach to reporting terror, characteristic of the troubles, was part and parcel of what helped marginalise the terror. That grown up common sense may be what good news looks like.

The challenges to good news of the Notting Hill fire may seem deeper. And let's call it the Notting Hill fire, because that's where it happened. I've done the "Notting Hill walk" and know just how expensive those grand houses in the richest borough in the country are. No surprise, though, to find that council residents were among the poorest of the poor and that the first casualty identified among the dead was a refugee from Syria.

If you want an explanation, you won't find it in the news reports and sophisticated speculation. My best suggestion is reading "This is London", a recent analysis by Ben Judah. I was given the book earlier this year by Ade, a Nigerian priest from Walthamstow on placement here at the cathedral, with the words "if you really want to understand the city I live in, read this!" I have read it and it is a deeply uncomfortable portrait of the capital city we all live next door to.

Part of the point I guess I'm making is the blindingly obvious one that human tragedy is almost exclusively the product of human fallenness, human veniality, human wickedness. That whole bundle of things that Paul parcels together under the title "sin". And remember that in Paul's writings sin doesn't so much mean the bad things we do but describes who we are. It is his anthropology.

But - and here is the good news - Paul and the Gospels do indeed have something extraordinary to say right into the grief at Grenfell Tower, or indeed to the 7.5 million Ethiopians currently starving to death, but strangely not featuring in our headlines.

And the good news comes here in today's first reading "...we are justified by faith" (Romans 5.5). These have become really problematic words both because people wilfully misunderstand or misinterpret them, and because at the Reformation they became a theological battle ground for reasons that probably aren't that obvious to most Christians today - even those who quote the line "justification by faith" as a theological mantra.

Paul is here in fact quoting directly from the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk. It's the very passage that by chance we were studying at Breakfast with the Bible this morning: "the righteous live by their faith" (Habakkuk 2.4). But as we might expect there is a real twist to Paul's use of this short line.

The word "righteous" is the same word in Greek as "justified" - which may make you ask some questions about bible translations. And in Habakkuk it means what we might mean when we say colloquially "I'm a good person". Someone who does the right thing; a moral person; someone who fills in their tax returns honestly and rarely exceeds the speed limit.

But Paul means something quite different, or almost the opposite. Indeed Paul is using the word righteous or justified with deep, deep irony. Very explicitly in Romans and elsewhere (including here in Romans 5) Paul makes it absolutely clear that we are not righteous or justified by anything that we

have done or could do. We are righteous or justified not because we are good people or because we do the right thing. We are righteous or justified simply because God says we are. And God says that because he loves us. And God shows this purpose of his love by becoming one of us in Jesus Christ. As the Bible actually says in John 3.16: "SO God loved the world THAT he gave his only begotten Son..." It doesn't say "God so loved the world.." - it's absolutely not about the emotional intensity of God's love but about the outcome or purpose of God loving the world in the first place. And it's not about us personally - no the scope of God's purpose in his love encompasses the whole world.

So we deserve nothing but we receive everything because of God's love and purpose made clear in Jesus Christ (REFERENCE). We cannot earn this; simply receive it as a gift. Jesus spells this out in the parable of the Pharisee and the sinner: the Pharisee does all the right things, says the right prayers, and knows he's right with God. The other knows simply that he's a mess and doesn't deserve even to be here. (REFERENCE) And which one goes home justified / righteous - that very same word again - of course the one who didn't deserve it. We - with our fine sense of justice, of "I've worked hard for it so I deserve it" - find this deeply offensive. But then this is the same God who says someone who has only worked one hour deserves the same pay as the one who has worked twelve.

Or as Paul again puts it so succinctly: "While we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5.8). Of course we don't deserve it, but in the upside down values of the kingdom we have to learn to receive it as a gift from a God whose generosity is matched and made visible by his sovereignty and love.

In a sense the whole point of the New Testament - though one that we really struggle to believe for ourselves and indeed for the whole world - is that God has already done the work for us. He has broken down the dividing wall, we are reconciled, righteous, justified, or in the glorious words of the great hymn, we are "ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven." That is not some future hope or distant fantasy but the reality of what is already true.

And part of the point of Christian prayer and worship day by day and week by week is to remind ourselves again and again, and to be reminded again and again of that glorious truth - and even more daring to receive that glorious truth in the sacrament of the altar. And yet more daring still to be sent out from here to share that glorious truth.

Let's take a real liberty and put our names in that list of people Jesus addresses in Matthew 10, this morning's Gospel:

Doris, David, Eric, Zachary, Elizabeth, Mary, Michael, Tamara, Mohammed, Vashti, Ijoma, Gerald, and on and on ALL OF US .....

These twelve - no, these hundreds! - Jesus sent out with the following instructions: 'Go to the lost sheep of the house of Essex and East London. As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

That's an astonishing enough command. We read the Gospel because Jesus speaks through it directly to us today. And asks us to share this extraordinary gift - the message of a kingdom where the first is last, the greatest is the servant, and - the most massive paradox of all - the one who stares into the ashes of his family home in Notting Hill tower block is called a "child of God". That's the good news and we are the heralds.

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