

23rd Annual Commemoration of the Rwandan Genocide

A few moments ago, Sir Eric Pickles asked, *“Where was God in the Rwandan Genocide? Where was God at Srebrenica?”*

Almost three hundred years ago, David Hume, the 18th century Scottish philosopher, asked:

“Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?”

The resources of faith do not pretend to provide an easy answer or solution to the problem of the amount and degree of suffering in the world, but they can lead to an active resolve not to abandon commitment to following the way of love in the midst of appalling suffering.

Our reading from St Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians was written, along with much of the New Testament, in an attempt to answer another question: *How are*

Christians to live in a world shaped not by Judaeo Christian faith, but by the power and might of Roman Empire?

What could the Christian response look like in the face of state-sponsored, emperor-sanctioned evil; in the face of cruelly acute suffering meted out solely on the basis of difference or otherness or faith?

St Paul was clear in his answer to the question, as Christian men and women his hearers were to clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, allowing the peace of Christ rule in their hearts. Whatever they did, they were to do *everything* in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks at all times to God the Father through him.

It would be foolish and naïve of me to suggest that that is how the Colossians actually lived at all times in Colossae; absurd to suggest that this is how Christians have lived in all places and at all times.

Those who call themselves Christians have not been immune from leading lives which have added to the world's pain and suffering, but St Paul was clear about what Christians should *aim* for, albeit knowing that they would, perhaps more often than not, fall far short of the ideal he set before them.

23 years ago, Rwanda experienced that most horrific of imaginable events - mass genocide. 100 days of the most intense and unforgiving brutality during which as many as a million people were slaughtered by their neighbours and many, many more people hideously and pitilessly maimed for life.

A hundred days which left 300,000 children orphans and 85,000 children, by the saddest of defaults, heads of their families when they should have been enjoying their childhood.

Rwanda has seen, all too clearly and all too quickly, how evil can set in and destroy – even by those who call themselves by God’s name.

Such things are not limited to Rwanda, however, and in recent days, on the streets of this great city of Westminster, on the Metro system in St Petersburg and throughout the sad towns and cities and villages of Syria, the world has witnessed, once again, the heart-breaking effects of misguided humanity’s mean, life-limiting evil at work.

So where *is* God in all of this?

On Sunday, Christians the world over will begin a solemn journey through the days of Holy Week, travelling in word and song towards a place of torture

and execution set up on a hill called Golgotha. And in the days after Good Friday Christians will continue to journey beyond Calvary to a place where the lifeless body of their saviour was entombed - only to find it empty.

And in the joy of Easter, Christians will discover that in the deepest darkness and through the most searing pain, not only does God not abandon his people, but that God is with them and alongside them *in* it.

They will discover that even when evil and darkness and death seems to triumph God is revealed as the unceasing abiding presence which holds everything in being at every given moment; that God does not stand back and observe his creation from a safe distance, but is intimately within every moment, alongside his people even when his people act in the most wicked and perverse ways imaginable.

Christianity has never supported a narrative of naïve confidence that things 'always happen for the best' - even if countless Christians have succeeded in turning hardship into a source of emotional and spiritual

growth. Nor do Christians hold that suffering is 'always for a reason' or 'a purpose'.

What Christians do believe is that even the darkest horror, the deepest despair, can be opened to God's redeeming and reconciling love - that the boundless creative activity of God sets no limits on its own self-giving, no matter how much God's work is laden with risk.

As an outflowing of divine love, creation cannot be coerced, still less predetermined by its Creator. Creation – human beings – can and do go adrift from God's divine purpose and intent – sometimes painfully so and with the most tragic of consequences.

The Christian priest and writer W H Vanstone wrote this:

If creation is the work of love, its 'security' lies not in its conformity to some predetermined plan, but in the unsparring love which will not abandon a single fragment of it, and man's assurance must be the assurance not that 'all that happens is determined by God's plan' but, rather, 'that all that happens is encompassed by God's love'.

As we seek to remember the events of 23 years ago and build on the progress that has been made in Rwanda through that time, may we - and all people - unite in our resolve that such things must never happen again, and may we commit ourselves to renewing our resolve, that whatever our faith, we clothe ourselves with compassion, with kindness, with humility, with meekness, with patience; and that we do all that lies in our power to ensure that God's peace fills our lives, our peoples, our world.

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Remember!

Unite!

Renew!

Amen.