

MEMORIAL



SERVICE

THE ADDRESS

The Right Rev. Professor James Whyte,
Moderator of the General Assembly of
the Church of Scotland

*Dryfesdale Parish
Church, Lockerbie*

*Wednesday
4th January 1989*

Readings: 2 Corinthians 1: 2-7; John 11: 17-27

Text: 2 Corinthians 1: 7 Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

When Martha greeted Jesus after the death of her brother Lazarus, it was with a word of reproach, even though deep within that reproach there was a pained and protesting faith. "Lord. If you had been here, my brother would not have died".

In every untimely bereavement, whether it is the quiet slipping from life of one most dearly loved, or whether it is awful disaster striking hundreds in the sky and from the sky, our first act of pained, protesting faith is to turn to God in reproach, even in anger. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother - my sister, my beloved, my child - would not have died." Why did this happen to him, to her, to me? Why was disaster not averted by the touch of an almighty hand? Martha speaks for us all. "Lord, if you had been here..."

Where has he been then, when all this happened? Absent? Looking the other way? The Christian answer to the age-old question why a good God permits evil is a strange one, because the Christian faith is that God is there where we might least expect to find him - in the disaster, in the tragedy, in the suffering. From Christmas to Easter, from Bethlehem to Calvary and the Emmaus Road that is the message of Christian faith. He is not outside of it all, absent, indifferent, untouched. He is in it. When Jesus hung upon the cross, Martha could not reproach him then. "Lord, if you had been here, my Master would not have died." In that dying, Jesus set the seal upon his sharing with us in all our human life, our human suffering and loss. When we cry in our pain, we cry to the one who knows pain, who shares it with us. That is strange comfort and it does not take away our pain, but may give it meaning, as with a flash of light.

When Paul speaks of God's comfort to those who are in trouble, he goes on immediately to talk about the sufferings of Christ - our sharing of his sufferings and his sharing of ours, for it is in the fellowship of suffering that we will find our God and know his comfort. If we could avoid the pain of being human, the pain of loving and losing, the pain of suffering with those who suffer, we would be choosing to stand aloof from humanity and apart from God.

"And our hope for you is well-grounded." said Paul, "for we know that if you have part in the suffering, you have part also in the divine consolation." But it is not only pain and grief that we feel at this catastrophe, it is also indignation. For this was not an unforeseeable natural disaster, such as earthquake. Nor was it the result of human error or carelessness. This, we now know, was an act of human wickedness: That such carnage of the young and of the innocent should have been willed by men in cold and calculated evil, is horror upon horror. What is our response to that?

The desire, the determination, that those who did this should be detected and, if possible, brought to justice, is natural and is right. The uncovering of the truth will not be easy and evidence that would stand up in a court of law, may be hard to obtain.

Justice is one thing. But already one hears in the media the word "retaliation". As far as I know, no responsible politician has used that word and I hope none ever will, except to disown it. For that way lies the endless cycle of violence upon violence, horror upon horror. And we may be tempted, indeed urged by some, to flex our muscles in response, to show that we are men. *To show that we are what?* To show that we are prepared to let more young and more innocent die, to let more rescue workers labour in more wreckage to find the grisly proof, not of our virility, but of our inhumanity. That is what retaliation means. I, for one, will have none of it and I hope you will not either.

Justice yes, retaliation no. For if we move in the way of retaliation we move right outside of the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, outside of the divine consolation. There is nothing that way but bitterness, and the destruction of our own humanity.

Atrocities, acts of cold and calculated evil, on the individual level and on the mass scale are not something novel on the human scene. To be sure, modern science has made available weapons and explosives that Genghis Khan could not have dreamed about. But evil and destructiveness are not new. The crucifixion of Jesus was an act of cold and calculated evil, involving the subversion of the justice for which the Roman state was renowned, Christ's sufferings are the sufferings of the innocent at the hands of evil and unscrupulous men and it is these we share when we suffer at the hands of the evil and the unscrupulous in our time. So if he is not here in Lockerbie, he is not anywhere.

But there has been not only suffering here, there has been courage and sacrifice and understanding and compassion. A whole community reaching out with open hearts and open homes and willing hands to sustain and comfort those who have suffered loss. Rescue workers, soldiers, R.A.F., police and civilians ready to work their hearts out to see what can be recovered from the wreckage. A co-ordination of essential services and of pastoral care so that those whose lives and homes have been shattered here and those who have made the long sad journey across the Atlantic, may be met with sensitive understanding and generous support and care.

Where was God in all of that? Can anyone doubt that he was right there in the midst of it? If here in the midst of evil we find goodness, if here in the midst of darkness we find light, if here in the midst of desolation we find ourselves strangely comforted, can we doubt that our lives are touched by the God of all comfort, the God whose consolation never fails us? It is the experience of humankind, that when we walk through the valley of the shadow, we are not helped by smooth words spoken from a safe distance, but by those who have known the darkness and are prepared to share it with us and hold us till we see the light. That is the way the comfort of God touches us and holds us. For it is as we share the suffering that we share the comfort. "Our hope for you is unshaken," says Paul, "for we know that if you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort."

Now, blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our afflictions, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God, to whom be glory for ever.

