

Opening Words at the Multi-Faith Service of Remembrance and Hope 21st July, 2005

Lord Mayor of Westminster, Your Excellencies the ambassadors and representatives of twenty countries, distinguished guests, colleagues and friends from many different faith communities who are gathered here this evening, may I welcome you to The Liberal Jewish Synagogue. We are honoured to be hosting and participating in this multi-faith service of remembrance and hope together with the Central London Mosque - Islamic Cultural Centre of Central London and the St John's Wood Churches. May I express my gratitude to the Director General of the Mosque, to the Imams there and to Revd. Anders Bergquist and the clergy from all the churches in St John's Wood for their support and work in bringing this service to fruition. We are grateful to the Three Faiths Forum for their support for this endeavour and welcome representatives to address us following the conclusion of the service.

We live in confusing and bewildering times, restlessly seeking some kind of certainty and calmness in our lives. Daily, news in all corners of our world, shatters that inner hope for peace, for reconciliation among peoples of different nationality or faith or political creed. On July 7th, in the crushing destruction and tragedy of four bomb explosions not far from here and yet again today with reports of incidents throughout London, we felt new fears and new terror yet one step closer to our own homes and the safety of our own lives.

We have come together this evening to remember the lives of the dead, to associate ourselves with their families, friends and communities and to lament the loss of men and women, many cut down in the prime of their lives. We are here too, to associate ourselves with those who have been wounded or badly maimed, traumatised by shock and terror, deafened, silenced, paralysed on a journey which they will never forget. We have come to pay tribute to men and women from the emergency services, who risked their own lives, who suppressed their own fears, to rescue, heal, comfort and bear witness to the violence of death and destruction.

In the quietness of this moment of remembrance we express not only our bewilderment and despair, but also our thankfulness for those whose hearts are generous and kind, whose deeds of loving kindness and compassion give us a future and a hope.

O God, we face the mysteries of life and death, and we put our trust in You, for You are the source of all being, You are the Guardian of all humanity our hope in times of trouble and despair. Help us hold fast to Your word, comfort us, be faithful to us and guide us in the paths of hope and peace to do Your will with a whole heart. Peace, peace to the far and to the near, saith the Lord. Amen.

Alexandra Wright

Interfaith Service of Remembrance and Hope The Liberal Jewish Synagogue, St. John's Wood 21 July 2005

The very fact that we are here together today is in itself the most telling response to the criminal bombers whose sole purpose was to blow us apart.

The very fact that we are here together today - Christian, Muslim, Jew and friends from other faiths - is testimony to the fact that dialogue works.

And we must dedicate ourselves to keep it working, to keep talking, to keep our hands held out in friendship one to the other.

Next year, we will mark the 350th anniversary of the return of the Jews to Britain, after the expulsion of the 13th century.

They have not all been easy years. Many Jewish families until this day can recall a childhood spent in poverty.

Many more have personal experience of slander and insult against the Jewish people.

But this, and more, never deterred us from maintaining our identity.

Nor did it deter us from seeking to make a maximum contribution to the society of which we were determined to become a valued part.

I would say to our Muslim friends that we understand your struggle to maintain your values in what must often seem to be alien, even hostile, surroundings.

But you are not alone.

Whether amongst decent and respectful friends, as in the Three Faiths Forum, or in simple, neighbourly relationships, I know that the Jewish community will happily share the fruits of its own experience in nurturing the roots you have already put down all over Britain.

We need to make a pledge each to the other, that we will not allow blind hatred or criminal acts of murder to fragment what has so painstakingly been created by our faith communities:

- the knowledge that we worship the same God;
- that we are created in his image;
- and that, when we blow each other to pieces, we are destroying his work.

If we can leave this house of prayer today determined

- to try and understand our neighbour who is different,
- to display a smile of welcome and not the frown of suspicion,
- to put out a hand in friendship and not in threat

--if we can do that, we will have triumphed and the suicide bombers will have lost.

Sir Sigmund Sternberg

An address given at a Multi-faith service of Remembrance and Hope in the Liberal Jewish Synagogue on 21st July 2005.

(The reading was Isaiah 35.1-9)

Many of you know the Middle East well, and you therefore know the annual miracle of the blossoming desert - the unexpected green, the spring flowers that grow in what had seemed an arid wilderness. Isaiah uses it as a wonderful metaphor for hope, springing vivid and green in the harshest conditions. Remember too that these verses, as usually dated by scholars, come from a time of national adversity: a time of subjugation, a time of exile, a time of aridity. But the prophet has hope. He believes that God's purpose is good, and he believes that God is powerful. God's purpose is creation and redemption, and there is nothing that can, in the end, frustrate his purpose. God is merciful; God is good; God is powerful. Therefore these verses of Isaiah thrill with hope for the future.

Let us think for a moment about good, and its relation to evil. I have noticed with some unease how, in the present climate, certain words are (in public conversation at least) taken to prohibit further thought: words like "evil" or "terrorist", for example. Once you have labelled a person or an activity as "evil" or "terrorist", there is an end of the discussion. If you try to go further, you will be accused of wanting to "understand" the evil, and therefore of sympathising with it, or condoning it. Now there seems to be a confusion here between different senses of the word "understand". We would be perplexed if doctors said they did not wish to understand the causes of cancer. How will they fight cancer if they do not understand its causes? Similarly, how do we fight the enemies of our shared values if we do not try, in this proper sense, to understand them? It is hard to see how this kind of understanding need imply any diminution of abhorrence or condemnation.

But the real danger is a more fundamental one. When we refuse to think about the origins of an evil action, we end up by treating evil as an absolute - in the same way that good is an absolute. We start to make for ourselves a dualist universe, in which good and evil fight each other, as both existing at the same level of being. But - and this is crucial - good and evil are quite different sorts of thing. St Augustine, who reflected deeply on this subject some 1600 years ago, concluded that evil was, in the end, the absence of good. You could compare light and dark. Darkness is not a thing in itself; it is the absence of light. A room is dark, not because it has dark in it, but because it doesn't have light in it. This has the merit of not treating good and evil as if they exist at the same level of being; its weakness is perhaps that the idea of evil as an absence does not do justice to the potency we experience in evil, to its sheer malignancy and

forcefulness. It is because of that potency of presence that Christians (and indeed others) have found themselves almost compelled to talk about evil in personalised terms: as the work of Satan, or the Devil. But then Satan, in Christian tradition, is a fallen angel.

There, perhaps, is an important clue to the nature of evil. It is not the absence of good - it is a perversion of good. Satan in his pride directed to himself the love that he should have directed to his Maker. The suicide bomber's self-immolation in the darkness of the London Underground is a hideous distortion of something that really is good, the love that sacrifices itself for the sake of another. To say that evil is a perversion of good is not to palliate or excuse it in any way. But it is to put evil firmly in its proper place: as utterly derivative, in a kind of hideous mis-shapeness, from its good original. Good is absolute, evil is not. That is why these verses of Isaiah are so hopeful. They come from a prophet who has grasped that the creativity and the redemptive purpose of a sovereign God are the ultimate reality. The love of a good God is what, in the end, is. That is why we know that good is stronger than evil, love stronger than hate, and life stronger than death.

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Multi Faith Service of Remembrance and Hope 21 July 2005

When the mosque opened in Regent's Park twenty seven years ago, this synagogue's Council sent a welcoming gift. Shortly afterwards, the Rev. John Miller, a Unitarian minister based at St John's Wood Church, approached me about the possibility of initiating a dialogue with the newcomer faith in our neighbourhood. We went to see the mosque Director, Sheikh Zaki Badawi, who was enthusiastic about the idea. And thus were born the Triologue meetings, the first public venture of its kind in this country.

Looking back, we achieved some encouraging results. Several hundred people would attend our meetings in church, synagogue and mosque. Vicars, imams and rabbis would lunch together regularly. We set up groups of doctors, teachers and social workers to discuss problems of common concern, and jointly supported a charity recommended by Peter Benenson of Amnesty International. These initiatives continued for about 5 years, but then foundered for two main reasons.

The first was because Sheikh Badawi left the mosque due to the fact - I am sure that he won't mind my revealing it now - that his stated aim of making Islam engage with and contribute to British society, did not meet with the approval of the powers that were. "We must learn from you Jews how to adjust to minority status in the West" he would often say to me.

The second reason was because events in the Middle East - this was in the aftermath of Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon - had inflamed tensions and made respectful discourse difficult. Politics would always intrude. Those politicians today who assert

that the London bombings had nothing to do with the invasion of Iraq are wilfully defending themselves.

But so too are those Muslim spokesmen who declare that their suicide bombers were not true Muslims, or those Jewish spokesmen who declared after the murderous rampage by Baruch Goldstein in 1994 when he killed 29 worshippers in Hebron's main mosque that he was not a true Jew, or those Catholic primates and Church of Ireland bishops who would declare after the latest Irish atrocity, that the perpetrators were not true Christians. The fact is that in each case, those who committed horrific acts found justification for them either in their sacred scriptures, or in the way those scriptures were interpreted by their teachers. As William Blake famously wrote: "Both read the Bible day and night, but thou readest black where I read white."

Ask a Christian what is the main teaching of Christianity, and the reply would probably be "love". Ask a Jew about Judaism, and then reply would probably be "Justice". Ask a Muslim about Islam, and the reply would probably be "peace". Let each one of us admit the many instances where in the name of our particular religion hatred not love, oppression not justice, war not peace, have marred and corrupted this image.

And because, for better or worse, religion is in and of the world, in and of civil society, it seems to me that one of the most urgent tasks facing faith leaders today is to engage in an honest debate about how we read our sacred texts. Because a teaching has been transmitted in the name of God or Jesus or Mohammed, would not give it automatic validity, even if it is ethically dubious? To what extent should advances in secular knowledge take precedence over ancient religious dogmas?

These are fundamental questions that affect the role of religions in modern society. Today's service brings together Jews, Christians and Muslims in shared grief and condemnation of the carnage inflicted on London a fortnight ago. If it is to be more than a one-off gesture, soon forgotten, we must pledge that church, synagogue and mosque will revive the initiative begun 27 years ago and work together to create a just society in which those of every faith, and none, can live together in peace, tolerance and mutual respect.

May that be the will of the One God whom we all worship.

Amen.

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