

Like many of you, I imagine, I was struck dumb by the images coming out of Gaza this week. On Sunday, Dr Ahmad Qandil, Surgeon and Professor of General Surgery at the Anglican Al Ahli Hospital, one of the few remaining qualified medical staff, was killed. On Thursday, the Roman Catholic Church of the Holy Family was hit, killing the church's caretaker along with two other people sheltering there.

It's hard to fathom the ongoing extreme violence in Gaza, Ukraine, and other places - especially Sudan, which has been creeping back into the news of late, and where the numbers of fatalities in an incredibly brutal civil war are the highest anywhere in the world at the moment. Let's be clear, the intentionality of destruction of life and infrastructure in Gaza is experienced by those living and dying there as Genocide - as it is in Sudan, and arguably also in Ukraine. One people is seeking to wipe another people from their land, perhaps from history altogether.

And yet our reading from Colossians this morning tells us that God has been "pleased to reconcile all things to himself through Jesus ... making peace through the blood of his cross." We cry out to God, feeling impotent and enraged - where is the evidence of this reconciliation, so boldly asserted? I know this is a subject to which we often return - but it doesn't go away!

The truth is, clearly, that reconciliation does not simply mean the end of violence and suffering. We cannot deny the truth of what we see and hear, but also we do not want to deny the word of God in scripture - so there must be some way of understanding how God is present in reconciling love in the midst of such a world, and what it means both for us, and for those who are suffering.

Later in the Colossians reading, Paul speaks about his own suffering, so it's clear that he doesn't believe that reconciliation means the end of suffering for everyone. That's important - a few verses earlier, he had been piling phrase upon phrase to underline the centrality of Christ, and the universality of God's work of reconciliation. This passage in Colossians chapter one is generally believed to be based on an ancient Christian hymn, with additional embellishments by Paul to underline his meaning, that Christ's Lordship extends everywhere. Yet as he continues in this passage, it sounds as though his experience almost contradicts his belief that God's work has overridden everything else.

To understand this we need to see that God's love reaches everywhere, but does not necessarily change it. My wife Ricarda is a hospital chaplain, and has a phrase which she uses sometimes to put this across: God's love protects us from nothing, but sustains us in everything. (This idea is often attributed to St John of the Cross, but was actually coined by James Finley, a clinical psychologist and spiritual director.) We don't often pray that way, of course - and there is nothing whatsoever wrong with praying for God to change everything. Indeed, our prayers should be honest, so we should absolutely beat the doors of heaven with our anguished cries for those suffering in the world, if not so much for parking places.

But the purpose of our prayers is to join our hearts to the heart of God, not the other way around. And that will lead us into God's anguish for those places. We do not care more than God about Gaza and the West Bank. We do not have to persuade God that what is happening in Gaza is Genocide. God knows what is in the minds and hearts of those who are ordering the attacks on people and buildings in Gaza. He knows what it's like for those who have to carry out those orders. God knows what it's like to have lost your home, members of your family, your limbs. God knows what it's like to live in fear of rocket attacks. God knows whether there are Hamas tunnels under any of those buildings, those homes and hospitals, or not.

In our gospel reading we are offered Mary and Martha as models of discipleship. My commentary rather helpfully suggests that if we were to ask Jesus should we be like Martha or like Mary, his answer would be "yes". We do not have to choose between the activist and the contemplative, the prayer and the doer. Someone else pointed out to me this week that this little story comes between the parable of the Good Samaritan, which Nitano spoke about last week, and his teaching about

prayer, including the Lord's Prayer. It would not have been much use to the man lying by the side of the road from Jerusalem down to Jericho if the Samaritan had paused, prayed (after asking permission, perhaps) and continued on his way. But neither should Martha forget that in prayer she aligns herself with the heart and mind of God, and to act without praying is to go out in one's own name, following one's own agenda, and can be to risk undermining the work of God.

This may all leave us feeling strangely impotent, however. Here in the Cathedral we have perhaps been big on prayer, quite short on action - though it's not clear what action we could take. Some of what we have done has been a combination of the two - calling people from across the faith communities to share in prayer in the wake of the October 7th attacks in 2023 was perhaps such an act, taking the moderate risk of inviting people from other faith traditions to offer prayer into this Christian space.

This week we are again looking at whether to put out a statement from the Cathedral about Gaza. We've only done that a couple of times in the current conflict, wary of the simplistic messaging that can obscure the complexities of a conflict. But it feels to many of us that it's time to add our voices to those speaking, especially from the World Council of Churches, the Quakers, and many others to condemn the continuing violence.

Speaking out for peace in the midst of war is rarely easy. There are always multiple narratives about the causes of war - at it's most basic, the question of who started it - and to call for a ceasefire may sound to some as though it might lead to legitimising the primary aggressor. Yet we cannot go back, we must find a way forward, even if it means engaging with those who are our enemies, or the enemies of our friends.

I've been listening this week to an excellent short series on Radio 4 called *Sideways, Chasing Peace*. I recommend it highly. Through interviews with some real life peace builders and pacifists, the presenter explores how peace can be built on the ground.

This is where Martha, Mary and St. Paul become one, for us: following Mary joins us the heart of God in grief and empathy for those who suffer; following Martha prompts us to do something, whatever is possible in our own situations, whether that is adding our voice to those putting pressure on our politicians who appear to be more interested in polls than saving lives, or putting our hands in our pockets to support those working in peacebuilding or relief work on the ground; following Paul reminds us that there is nowhere God is not present, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord, who has broken down every barrier between us and God. Ultimately that reconciliation will also extend to all peoples, but we have yet to see that day.

Here in Coventry we have been given the gift of hope, springing from our history. We are called to be witnesses to that hope. If it was possible for Britain and Germany to rebuild loving relationships of mutual cooperation after the atrocities of the blitz inflicted on cities like ours, and then in reprisal the terrible destruction wreaked upon Berlin, Hamburg, Dresden and so many more, then it is possible also in Israel Palestine, Ukraine and Russia, Sudan and other places. The second world war saw over 40,000 civilians die in air raids on Britain, and somewhere between 350,000 and 500,000 killed in Germany. These figures are horrific. Yesterday I welcomed a visitor from Hamburg where over 40,000 were killed in raids in 1943. Germany started the war, of course - although the part that punitive reparations following the end of the first world war needs to be considered. But their suffering was immense. Who needs to forgive who for the suffering of that war? The power of our "Father Forgive" text, and the Coventry Litany which uses it as a refrain, is that it acknowledges that we all need forgiveness, regardless of who started it.

We call and pray for peace in Gaza, peace in Ukraine, peace in Sudan ... but perhaps especially in Gaza where it feels as if we have some agency, to nothing of some responsibility. The circumstances which preceded this war were terrible for all concerned, and what has boiled over has been the consequence of that. Now it is time for hope to be recovered, and a positive peace, one that is based upon justice for all in the land, to be achieved. Let's call upon our witnesses of

Paul, Martha and Mary to direct us in our prayers and in our actions - and offer our witness from Coventry that it is possible to build a different future.

*Now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. Eph 3. 20,21*