

SERMON FOR ASCENSION SUNDAY | 28 May 2017

At the 10am Mass today young Hettie Hinton will be baptized.

And in years to come, if anyone should ask – when did that happen, it would have been good to have been able to say – the weekend Arsenal won the FA cup final for the 13th time – or on Ascension Sunday when we go out of Church with a helium balloon to celebrate Jesus' leaving the disciples for his new role in heaven as our chief advocate and guide.

Actually what people will say is 'it was the week of the 2017 Manchester Bombing'. And we will mentally add 22/5 to 9/11 (the Twin Towers disaster) and 7/7 (the London bombing of the three underground trains in 2005).

Each of these outrages has a character of their own but there was something particularly chilling about the deliberate attack on the young in Manchester: 20,000 packed into the Manchester Arena and the calculated way the bomber stood among the mums and dads, aunts, uncles, grannies and friends in the foyer - people concerned with the most precious relationships in life, the happiness and the protection of their children.

And we wonder, yet again what we can do to stop these things happening. Of course there have been calls for greater surveillance on those returning from Libya and Syria – until we realise that the numbers of people resident in the UK who have been caught up in those conflicts is at least 3,000 and there simply aren't the resources to watch them all. Then there are appeals to Facebook and other parts of the social media to be much quicker in taking down sites which excite the anti-modern, anti-western sentiments of these Saudi Arabian trained fundamentalists – especially the ones which show in detail how to make these bombs. It is terrifying to know that the device used in Manchester was a replica of the ones used in London in 2005 – and in Brussels and in the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris.

Those of us with slightly longer memories will recall how the name 'Manchester' had another connotation: it was in 1992 and the height of the Troubles that the IRA planted bombs in the Arndale Shopping Centre – leading to huge suspicion among the large Irish Catholic community in the city, in case they were sympathetic to the IRA.

What becomes blindingly obvious, as we stand and assess the damage of each of these events, is the way our communities can so easily be divided up between goodies and baddies. The recent speeches from the White House are particularly sad examples of this. Who is to decide whether a Sunni or a Shia, an Arab or a Jew, a Catholic or a Protestant, a Russian or an American are always right or always wrong? This kind of simplistic bi-polar diplomacy cannot begin to solve these hugely complex divisions. In fact such a black and white approach is not so very different from the mind-set of the terrorists who see themselves as martyr soldiers for some apocalyptic clash of civilisations.

So thank God for the TV pictures from Manchester this week – the sea of flowers, the elderly Muslim cleric leading an equally elderly Jewish woman by the arm as they stood in solidarity in St Ann's Square. Thank God for the way the whole city has come together in their pain, paying tribute to all who have lost their lives. Thank God for the way not just the emergency services but ordinary men and women have given and cared for total strangers in their hour of need – with a generosity that says 'we're in this together'.

Joanna Moorhead, a Mancunian journalist now living in London, writing about the 1992 IRA bombing wrote: *We all knew Manchester would recover and we all knew something better would come out of something terrible. We all knew that those who had been affected would be tenderly cared for. We all knew we would be able to talk about the trauma. And we all knew that, in the end, we would look after one another: and that we would, and we will, survive. Why, because Manchester is that sort of place; you are only a heartbeat away from the really important stuff of life.*

What was Jesus' ministry all about if not to build a Church that had all those hallmarks? He couldn't be everywhere, all the time and so he promised to send his Holy Spirit to make it possible for each and every one of us to do the work of God: to care for all, to affirm all – and to allow the really important issues in our lives to be shared and, where necessary, healed.

Hettie's baptism is yet another example of the message we give to all who want to divide us from one another: love will always overcome hate, light will always overcome the dark – and Jesus' call to us to search for the truth, working at reconciliation and respect for all, starts here, alongside Hettie, now.