

SERMON FOR TRINITY I | 18.06.2017 at 8am

So the number of those killed in the Grenfell Tower fire has crept up to 58. Not that anyone is under any illusions that this figure will not rise to take account of very many more who are still missing. It is the worst possible tragedy for the people of Notting Dale – and of course there have to be real concerns for all those (mainly from overseas) who are currently housed in similar tower blocks, up and down the country.

In the face of such devastation what has been fantastic has been the most amazing generosity by ordinary Londoners. Tony Collins of the Duchess pub on Prebend Street has organised a couple of truckloads of basics and that has been replicated all over the city. It hasn't mattered that people didn't know the people involved: instinctively everyone has raided their cupboards - and the piles of goods are simply and freely available to anyone in need.

As we know the response from our elected politicians, locally in Kensington and nationally, has not been quite so swift or as generous. Thank goodness, after the initial reluctance – and after the Queen, Prince William and Jeremy Corbyn had spent time with families – the Prime Minister received a delegation of those bereaved and those made homeless by the fire.

And among that delegation to Downing Street – in his bright purple cassock – was Bishop Graham Tomlin, area bishop of Kensington.

Of course St James' Church across the road had become a centre for the distribution of food and clothing, the place where people were fed and where many of the outside visitors could find a quiet space to talk and comfort the bereaved. On the news feed this morning there is a picture of Jeremy Corbyn with his arms around a young woman, hugely distressed by all these events.

And Graham's value – as well as sharing in the compassion which I have already described – was also to be a highly articulate spokesperson for the group, for whom a ministerial meeting in Downing Street would have been a real challenge. There would have been plenty of tears – and plenty of anger; what the bishop would have brought was something equally vital: God's wisdom.

It is exactly the picture we get in today's Gospel which I have summarized in the graphic on your pew sheet. Jesus saw, and spent time with, the people. And he could see and feel their distress and their inertia in the face of such desperate sadness.

The extraordinary thing about Jesus was his ability to be both 'of the people' and also slightly detached. No one would have suggested that he wasn't deeply affected by the crises he saw around him. Like the Queen he couldn't actually 'do' very much but to be there, on the ground, was actually exactly what people wanted. As one of the vox pops said, *the Queen didn't have to come: but she knew she had to be there. You can't be compassionate 'somewhere else'.*

But the effect of these high profile visits was to draw attention and to discover that there are, actually, plenty of labourers in the vineyard if we know where to look and know how to harness all that goodwill. Someone described the response to the fire as being like the London blitz seventy years ago but I think that is a bit too glib. In reality, when push comes to shove, our front line services do hold up, staff do come back on duty on their rest days, donations do come pouring in – and love and generosity continue to emerge in ways that take our breath away.

But again this is rooted in our faith. What does St Paul say in the 2nd reading from Romans? Yes, he says, *it is very unusual for someone to die for someone else although it does happen.* But at the heart of what we believe as Christians and what we believe is Jesus' supreme example: Christ did not give only to the good and finally die for the righteous; he did not give his life for his friends and for those he knew. As Paul makes clear: *God proves his love for us in that, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us all.*

That is what is happening in Notting Dale around Grenfell Tower. In the middle of all that suffering, these words are coming alive. And Bishop Graham, in his flashy purple cassock, is not just joining in 'being nice' but is pushing out the vision: this is what God does, caring and dying for people whether they deserve it or not.

And if that is so, my final question is whether that extends to Theresa May? She has real problems with relationships and her judgment may be awry: but isn't she entitled to compassion too?