

SERMON FOR TRINITY 14 | 17.09.17 at 8am.

Burma, Myanmar, is a long way away. It doesn't have the holiday destination ring about it like Thailand, Cambodia or Vietnam. For a few, Burma is remembered as a particularly dreadful theatre in the second world war and the building of railways by slave labour under the Japanese.

The one ray of light in that country's road to democracy has been the figure of Aung San Suu Kyi, recently elected to lead the country although peculiarly not allowed to be Prime Minister because of her marriage to an Englishman. After years and years of detention in her home, she became the radiant figure of hope in a country ravaged by war and the legacy of a corrupt and ruthless military machine. She has been likened to a Burmese Nelson Mandela. She is a Nobel Peace Laureate.

Until now. Until, with more political authority than she has ever had, a weakness has been detected. She shares with almost all the Rakhine Buddhist majority in Burma, an utter loathing for the Rohingya Muslim minority in the north.

Over the last month, almost a quarter of the 1 million Rohingya people have fled across to Bangladesh, doing their best to avoid the landmines that have been laid all along the border by the army. Those afraid or incapable of fleeing are herded into the most squalid of camps, denied access by international aid agencies and the prying eyes of reporters. The children have no schools, the sick have no hospitals. When a few resist and attack the army in frustration, they are labelled terrorists.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu recently wrote an open letter to the Burmese leader saying *If the political price of your ascension to the highest office in Myanmar is your silence, the price is surely too steep.* A former correspondent of the Economist, Richard Crockett, has suggested that Aung Suu Kyi's failure to protect the Rohingya minority suggests that she is, underneath, still an unreconstructed Burmese nationalist. While the Army burns down their villages, shoots fleeing families and throws babies into the rivers, the words she wrote in 1990 still hang in the air: *Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it.*

Somewhere, at some time, Aung Sam Suu Kyi has had reason to fear Muslims. It is deep within her. When she was interviewed on Radio 4 by Mishal Husain, the first Muslim female interviewer in that role, she is reported to have said *why did nobody tell me that I would be questioned by a Muslim?*

Our theme today is not, of course, Aung San Suu Kyi. Nor do we seek to attack her or parody her. But in our world of mistrust, in our tendency to raise up and thrust down, we are bound to pick out examples of those who highlight the power of Jesus' message. This Gospel story of a man who was forgiven a huge debt, and then went on to bully someone who owed him almost nothing is not just a story in a book but a radical exposure of a recurrent problem: the blatant hypocrisy that lies beneath the surface of so many. Forgiven and freed themselves, they have no ability to learn from what they have experienced.

Celebrating Ken Thompson's 80th birthday last night, somehow the topic of forgiveness came up. To someone's comment that they found it almost impossible to forgive people who have done them wrong or disappointed them, Ken's truly wise words were: *but who would want to live with the weight of not forgiving for all of their lives?*

And what does it do to the person who is not forgiven? Is anyone really to be subjected to eternal punishment for the whole of their lives? Isn't that what Joseph's brothers feared after their father died? They knew they had done wrong and worried that Joseph would hold a grudge against them forever for what they had done.

I love the magnanimous words of Joseph but also his faith: *Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good in order to preserve the lives of many people...* And so it was: had the brothers not sold him to the caravanserai in the desert, the famine would have wiped out hundreds of thousands of people.

Not to forgive his brothers would not only do Joseph no good – after all, resentment corrupts more than anything else – but God's will was brought about by what they did. Who are we to know the outcome of the silly actions of others?

For people of my generation one of the greatest stories of forgiveness comes from the Irish Troubles and the example of a lone draper in Enniskillen.

On 8th November 1987 a bomb planted by the Provisional IRA exploded during Enniskillen's Remembrance Day parade, injuring Gordon Wilson and fatally injuring his daughter Marie, a nurse. The bomb was timed to go off at 10:43am, just before the ceremony was due to start. In an emotional television interview Wilson gave to the BBC only hours after the bombing he described his last conversation with his dying daughter.

Buried in rubble after the 40lb bomb had exploded and unable to move, he held her hand and comforted her as she lay dying. And he recalled her last words: "Daddy, I love you very much". Marie never regained consciousness and died later in hospital. Altogether 11 people were killed and 64 seriously injured. But the BBC would later describe the bombing as a turning point in the Troubles because the attack shook the IRA "to its core".

For pivotal to the change in attitude towards this sort of attack was Wilson's reaction to the death of his daughter. The 60-year-old draper publicly forgave those who had planted the bomb and said he would pray for them. He also begged that no-one take revenge for Marie's death and pleaded with loyalists not to do. The historian Jonathan Bardon recounts, *No words, in more than twenty-five years of violence in Northern Ireland, had such a powerful, emotional impact.* Gordon Wilson's legacy has since been called "The Spirit of Enniskillen".

On the front of your pew sheet this morning is a picture of a country path with the words: *So each of us shall give account of himself to God.* And the invitation is to release ourselves from the angst of keeping grudges and the negative effects that inevitably eat away at us when we fail to let go of the wrongs done to us. All of us will stand before God's judgement seat and all of us will have any number of reasons to be fearful of the outcome.

But Christianity is built on one central truth: love casts out fear. If we love God and can forgive, we can – as Ken said – enjoy living without the burden of carrying grievances – knowing that we will also be forgiven. Pray that message will be heard in Burma too.