



At the head of my notes for tonight I have one picture which may well be the iconic image from 2017. It was taken on the steps of St Paul's Cathedral earlier this month and shows a large banner being held by a Catholic priest and an imam. In the centre is a green heart with the words 'Grenfell' crossing it.

Between the two clerics we can see the faces of a dozen or so of the bereaved, carrying pictures of their loved ones. While there have been any number of atrocities this year – on Westminster Bridge, in Borough Market, at a Country Music Festival in Las Vegas, in Nice and at a score of Coptic Churches in Egypt, Grenfell stands as a particularly potent symbol of what happens when we don't pay enough attention to the conditions in which people live and work.

We might, on the other hand, have chosen one of the devastatingly accurate cartoons that have filled the Evening Standard this year on the success – or otherwise – of the Brexit negotiations. All the major political figures – British, Irish and European - have found their way into Gerald Scarfe's drawings. And the same question has been posed: can we trust any of these people to see us through this very difficult situation?

On Saturday afternoon our family went to the ballet to see a professional performance of the Nutcracker. It wasn't at Covent Garden but our niece, Erin Flaherty, was dancing the lead role. One day the Coliseum Watford; next – well, who knows?!

After it was all over, we hung around in the foyer waiting – as you do - for her to emerge from the Stage Door. Nearby were two very excited little girls who had been brought to the theatre especially to see Erin. They literally threw themselves at her, saying how watching her performance had reawakened their love of dancing. Hot and sweaty as she still was from the performance, you couldn't fail to see how touched she was by all this enthusiasm... although she could probably have done with less of the pushing and pulling that went with it!

As we ponder over the past in the peace of this this Midnight Mass, I hope each of us can recall someone like Erin - someone who has so impressed us with their talent, or their care for us or for the positive stand they have taken. It may have been a parent, a teacher or a friend who (like Erin for those two admirers) have left an indelible mark on the way we have lived since.

And I suspect that the common denominator in all of our examples, as in Nancy Meyer's film 'The Holiday' (a favourite Christmas film in our house) is that it is only genuine people who really change the world. In The Holiday, after Iris has moved to Los Angeles to get away from a two-timing boyfriend, it is the unlikely friendship of Arthur, the 90year Jewish movie script writer neighbour, who turns her life around. And what gets to her is his modest integrity.

Whatever form Christmas takes for each of us, however commercial it has become and however much we go out of our way to celebrate with as many people as possible, what we all appreciate at this time of the year are those people who genuinely love and care about us. In the middle of the turkey and the Santa hats, what counts are those who – throughout the year– have stood by us through thick and thin, the people who do their level best to understand how we are and who don't constantly judge us and walk away from us because we aren't able to be bubbly and successful all the time.

Sadly, the anger of the residents at Grenfell, the despair of many who worry about way the Brexit negotiations are playing out, the general anxiety that hangs in the air – not least about the way some members of the press and the police operate - are all fueled by the suspicion that too many of those who hold power in our society are only motivated by self-interest.

And that is one of the key reasons for trying to be faithful Christians. Unlike the material, secular world where success is measured in terms of how much you have achieved, Christianity is headed up by a God who cares for every single one of us – with a strong bias for those who are weak, poor and inarticulate. As the second reading from Titus teaches: *be ready for every good work; avoid quarrelling, be gentle and show every courtesy to everyone...*

While it is hardly a secret that we have failed to live up to those standards - and some like Tim Farron have felt the tension between politics and authentic Christianity to be impossible - there have also been a continuous series of lights which have pierced through the darkness too – not least the fall of Robert Mugabe, the ‘Me Too’ campaign which has finally exposed the abusive behaviour of people like Harvey Weinstein in the film industry, the charity given to the Grenfell survivors and the unexpected acceptance of Meghan Markle into the Royal Family.

To which we might add the appointment of the first female bishop of London. Interestingly Sarah Mullally, in a very modest first crack at writing a Christmas message for the Diocese, describes herself as a half full rather than a half empty kind of person. It seems to me that that is a pretty good place from which to start if we are going to continue to be ‘genuine people’, showing how the light of Jesus has not, is not and will not be overwhelmed by the darkness that all of us experience as a very formidable reality.

My prayer is that Bishop Sarah will be yet one more role model for those who want to renew their enthusiasm for Jesus: that in places we can’t reach, she will as Titus suggests, enable people to *devote themselves to good works and those things that are excellent and profitable to everyone*. And, here tonight, we promise to do the same - in the places we can reach - so that, as in last night’s Crib service, the world glows with the light of the new born Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.