

YORKSHIRE POST SATURDAY 10TH AUGUST

‘Friendship casts out Fear’

For 15 years before I moved back to Yorkshire Southport came under my pastoral care as Bishop of Liverpool. It was so different from other towns of the diocese such as St Helens, Warrington, Bootle and Wigan. Driving up Lord Street was like promenading through the 1950s. There was a serenity and an old fashioned sense of civility and respectability. All that was shattered last Monday when the Town was catapulted into the cruel world of the 2020s with the brutal slaughter of innocent children dancing to the sounds of Taylor Swift.

With the vicious taking of the lives of Alice, Bebe and Elsie Southport was violently robbed of its famous holiday spirit. In its place surged a wave of inconsolable grief across the whole community who to a man, woman and child rose up to comfort one another not just in vigils but in countless acts of courage and kindness.

Whatever possessed the heartless mind of the one who’s now charged with murder and attempted murder (I will not dignify him with a name) I doubt that even he would have anticipated the volcanic lava of hatred that erupted in the consequent attacks on the police in the town and elsewhere in England.

It was Winston Churchill referencing Mark Twain who said that a lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on. And that was in the days before the internet. Now social media and irresponsible platforms let lies smother the truth, inflame prejudices, aggravate grievances and deepen divisions. So the lies about who murdered Alice, Bebe and Elsie have triggered violence by extremists across the country.

These criminal disturbances are such a contradiction of the spirit of Southport where the strength of the churches and faith groups is such a strong thread in the fabric of the town’s solidarity.

Some years ago the churches there came together to hire the Floral Hall on the seafront, the very name conjures up the genteel nature of the town. They asked me to be the speaker. The Hall was packed with hundreds of local people. I was asked to speak about ‘Why do people suffer?’ because the biggest question that people of any faith face is how can you believe in a God of Love when there is so much suffering in the world.

That's a question that many, many more people will be seeking answers to this weekend.

But one of the silver linings to this dark cloud of tragedy is the way that leaders of the faith communities both locally and nationally are coming together to denounce religious discrimination and in particular hatred of Muslims. The oldest Islamic Prayer Room in England is in Liverpool, It was founded by a British convert over 150 years ago Abdullah Quilliam.

When the Muslim congregation wanted to develop it as a cultural and educational centre for British Islam they asked me, their Christian bishop, to be its Patron. When I was asked why I accepted their generous invitation I explained that the second great commandment is to love your neighbour as yourself. It was my way of expressing neighbourliness and friendship across a religious boundary.

One of my closest friends in Liverpool was Akbar Ali, chairman of the Liverpool Mosque. When Ken Bigley who was born in Liverpool was held hostage by terrorists in Iraq and then brutally murdered we worked together publicly to appeal for peace between our communities. It was the first time I had prayed with a Muslim. But in those tragic circumstances it seemed the most natural and the most spiritual thing to do.

It is one of the most vital deeds of the 21st Century that people of different faiths work together for the common good without compromising their own convictions. The future stability of local neighbourhoods and the world depends upon fostering harmony between our different religions.

It is one of the enormous achievements of The King that He has for decades and well ahead of His time encouraged mutual respect between faiths. His Coronation was the perfect example of affirming our diverse communities of faith and race without in any way compromising the Christian heritage and essence of the Service.

Years ago in Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral I heard a lecture by Sir Trevor Philips about community relationships. He challenged the audience to make a point individually of making friends with someone different from ourselves. I took that to heart. One of those friendships has been with a Muslim Professor from Azerbaijan, Nariman Gasimoglu, who translated the Quran into Turkic.

Together we have tried to show how both Christians and Muslims from the Bible and the Quran can work together to care for the Earth. We sign our emails 'Your friend in Faith'.

All that has happened in Southport and elsewhere contributes to anxiety about our society and the world. The future is full of fear. Of course, we rightly look to the police and to the emergency services and to politicians to keep us safe. But as the people of Southport have shown us there is also a role for us individually which is to build personal relationships that make our communities strong and resilient. To balderise a famous saying from the New Testament that echoes the teachings of Jesus it is only 'friendship (across faiths and race) that casts out fear'.

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