

Grenfell Tower fifth anniversary

I have always resisted a term which is still being used: 'The Grenfell Tower tragedy'. The word 'tragedy' depersonalizes what happened, as if it were a 'tragic accident' or a 'natural disaster', or even 'an act of Fate'.

When we know that the Grenfell Tower fire was the result of actions by people in positions of power towards a disadvantaged community.

Recklessly low thresholds in building regulations, shortcuts and shoddy work by contractors, an immensely rich council's decision to reduce the quality of cladding, the multiple shortcomings of the Tenant Management Organisation, the council's failure to provide adequate comfort and relief in the immediate aftermath of the fire . . .

These weren't impersonal forces but part of an extended process of neglect, which had the words 'death' and 'traumatization' written through it, from the very beginning.

At angry public meetings after the fire, there were calls for arrests.

That was five years ago.

As the buck has passed from person to person, during the apparently interminable Inquiry, arrests – let alone prosecutions – are still a distant prospect.

Back in 2017, the Prime Minister Theresa May promised that Grenfell would not become another Hillsborough, with justice delayed for year after year, to ever-deepening trauma.

How many of us believe that now?

People caused this fire, in national and local government, and in a significant number of businesses.

And yet how many will be called to account?

The Grenfell Tower was an almost biblical moment of revelation for those who have eyes to see: showing us who we really are.

How some people are worth less than others.

How our country is tainted by a deep distrust of immigrants.

Whether they were born in this country, arrived 50 or 15 years ago, the Grenfell families were part of a diverse community of ordinary people, raising their children, working hard to make ends meet.

But in Kensington and Chelsea, they were outsiders.

The Grenfell Tower fire has revealed a shadow, a darkness at the heart in our public life, where profit is prioritized over people, where those who live on council estates are stigmatized.

But as in all moments of stark revelation, we have also seen the opposite.

In the photos of the beautiful faces of those who died.

In the dignity and grace of those who survived.

In the courage of firefighters.

In the support of those who gathered round in the immediate aftermath of the fire and in the weeks and months that followed.

In the diligence of the teams who painstakingly assembled evidence from each floor of the ruined tower.

And in so many other ways.

Of course, there has been anger, but the abiding image for me is of the Silent Walks, on the 14th day of each month.

Thousands assembled at the Methodist Church by the Tower, walked up Ladbrooke Grove and round to Maxilla Social Club under the Westway flyover, which became a shrine and place of gathering.

In silence.

These walks have a liturgical power, a depth, a compassion, a solidarity we rarely see, and there will be one today at 6.30pm.

And so, when the Tower was covered, emblazoned with the words 'Forever in Our Hearts', and the image of the green Grenfell heart, this had meaning.

Those words, that image came from a deep, enduring, tender place.

The shadow heart of our politics of inequality; the green heart of compassion.

These contrasting hearts appear before us as a biblically resonant choice: one leading us to death, literally, and the other to life.

In the woundedness of those who survived and are still traumatized I see the face of the wounded Christ. Not everyone would put it that way, but everyone with eyes to see recognizes the contrast between actions that diminish and depersonalize, and those which affirm our shared humanity and raise up the human person.

For much of the time, lines are blurred, but they weren't at Grenfell.

Grenfell shows us how much is at stake in our shared life.

Maybe the word tragedy isn't so inappropriate after all, if we take to heart the words from our first reading, in which the prophet Jeremiah proclaims God's judgement on 'the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture.'

The abuse of power, systemic sin, has tragic consequences, not for the perpetrators but for the most vulnerable, which is why in Luke's gospel, Jesus announces himself in his local synagogue as one who has been anointed, 'to bring good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

This sombre night is permeated by a sense of powerlessness.

But even so, we are here.

To lament, for those who died and for those who still suffer, in the fervent belief that God holds the poorest and most victimized forever in a very deep place in his heart.

To cry for justice, despite the odds, that all those those involved in the shadowy dealings that led to the Grenfell Tower fire will be brought to account; that public policy will change, that people in other tower blocks will be protected.

And to commit to hope in a tipping point: that the scandal of inaction will before long lead to a new type of politics, to a new sense of community, to greater compassion and wisdom in our leaders.

And so, let us pray, for the healing and justice of the kingdom of God.