

**Sermon preached by the Rt Revd. Philip North, Bishop of Burnley
in Blackburn Cathedral
on Sunday 18 June 2017**

(the Sunday after the fire at the Grenfell Tower in London in which some 80 people died)



Yesterday I received an Email from a former curate who is now a Headteacher in West London in a primary school very close to site of Grenfell Tower. He was in touch to ask for prayers for the family of one of his teaching assistants who lived in the building and in his email he wrote, "Up close the site is horrific - the TV pictures can't capture this.

"Those who have lost relatives are wandering the streets looking at lost posters, but there are also tourists and rubberneckerers intruding on their grief and approaching and asking questions. Some of the journalists have behaved despicably. The grief is incredibly raw and the questions over how, if and when the rest of the building can be searched and bodies recovered is making this worse. Many of the lost are Muslim and they need to bury their loved ones quickly. This is a

poor community and this will take a generation to get over. Everyone knows someone who has been affected."

He attached to his email a chilling picture painted by one of his four year old pupils. A page covered in the vibrant reds and oranges of flames consuming a tower block are stark testimony to the trauma that child will live with for the rest of its life. He texted me again this morning to tell me that the Police had just confirmed that the missing family, who had three children, were all killed.



There can be very few people who have not wept a few tears this past week over the appalling horror at Grenfell Tower, few also who will have not found their imaginations taking them into the heart of an inferno in which whole families were killed by a terrifying wall of flame with many of the bodies too charred ever to be identifiable. And of course the incident raises the question we always ask on occasions such as these. Why? Why did this happen?

The difference this time is that the answer is so simple that the question barely needs asking. **These people died because they were poor. It's as simple as that.**

I used to minister in Camden Town in a similar part of London. There the rich and the poor live side by side. But whilst they occupy the same geographical space, they live parallel lives which never touch. They go to different shops and cafes, they have different jobs, they send their children to different schools. And the biggest difference is housing. I remember a new block being constructed in Camden. There was one set of doors on the main road which gave access through electric doors and past a security guard into the high-end luxury flats. Round the corner on a side street where the bins were put out was a separate set of 'poor doors' which gave the occupants of the social housing access to accommodation built to a far lower specification.

Grenfell Tower was the housing of the poorest. It was occupied by refugees, first wave immigrants, taxi drivers, care workers, security guards and those on zero hours contracts. That's why, when they were constructing and maintaining that tower block, the cheapest options were taken at every turn. That's why, when the fire came, the building was so dangerous that the conflagration was quickly unstoppable. In a culture in which economics trumps everything, your value is contingent on your wealth.



The new cladding

And it's not just London. That burning tower in Latimer Road serves as a potent symbol of a world of **scandalous social inequality**. We are part of a culture which understands human flourishing and happiness in wholly economic terms. **Your life is precious only in so far as you can pay for it (!)**

But I just wonder if things might be beginning to change. At Grenfell Tower we have seen two things which indicate a very different mindset.

First we saw genuine crowd **compassion** with huge numbers rushing to the area to make a difference. With their generosity, their willingness to volunteer and even on occasions open up their own homes, they put slow-footed, insensitive local and national governments to shame.



And **second** we saw **raw anger** which, if properly channelled, has the power to transform. The mood is changing. There is a longing for a new way of relating as human beings, one where we realize that our value is derived not from our wealth but from our relationships.

Last week I found myself at a 'Kindness Commission' in Blackpool. 300 people gathered to work out ways in which we could be nicer to each other. It was all very sweet, but I couldn't help asking myself why it was felt necessary. It is evidence of a growing concern about the quality of our relationships. There is increasing realization that economic growth cannot deliver human happiness. Rather **happiness is derived from the quality of the relationships that we build, from our mutual belonging.**

And for us as Christians that is fascinating, because when it comes to relationships we have a great deal to say. Healed relationship is the very heart of the Gospel we proclaim, it is what Jesus came to do. Through the cross he has reconciled us to the Father, and as those who have been reconciled, **we are sent into the world with a ministry of reconciliation.**

The Gospel reading we have this morning shows Jesus building a whole new type of human community. He calls the 12 belong to each other with the purpose of inviting others to belong. This new community of Jesus has so much to teach as we think about the sort of community we want to be as a nation. To understand it we need to focus on just three words – preciousness, place, purpose.

In the community of Jesus all are **precious**. Jesus calls the 12 by name. They are a ragtag bunch of fishermen and sinners, and yet their names matter, and their names matter because they matter. In fact they matter so much he will die for them. Your own preciousness is not about wealth or connections or influence or education. **You are precious because Jesus loves you and has died for you. That's all, and that's enough.**



In the community of Jesus all have a **place**. I wonder if you have seen the latest British Army recruiting advert? It is short and simple and shows a small group of troops looking out for each other on exercise in the downpour of the rainforest. It simply says, **'The Army. Real belonging.'** It is very powerful because of the deep human instinct to belong. An individualistic, materialistic world is also a deeply lonely one. The community that Jesus builds is one in which everyone has a valued place, it is one of **profound mutual care, where people take responsibility for each other and especially for the weakest.**



In the community of Jesus all have **purpose**. And that purpose is about giving yourself away. The twelve are sent to proclaim good news. In other words this community exists for the benefit of others. In the same way the Christian community that we build exists not for our own benefit but for the benefit of those who are not yet members. We are called to make of our lives a gift to the world, **we are called to live not for self, but for service.**



Preciousness, place, purpose. That is the sort of community Jesus builds amongst his followers. And that is the sort of community that we must build here in Blackburn Cathedral.



The Church's response to the Grenfell Tower disaster on the ground has been wonderful with buildings thrown open, volunteers offering service and huge donations of food, clothes and shoes.

But there is another response we can make as Christians, and it's one that can be made by all, not just by those on the spot in London. That response is to pay fresh attention to the quality of the Christian community that we ourselves build in our local churches. It is to model another way of being human, one based not on economics, but on **self-sacrificial relationships of love.**

You are not a random group of individuals, you are not here for own benefit, for the lovely music, or even because you have chosen to be. **You are here because Jesus has called you here.**

You are here because he wants you to be part of a Gospel-centred community in this place which models to the world the truth that human flourishing is founded in quality relationships of love.

From the dust and ashes of Grenfell Tower, let us commit ourselves afresh to being and building the community of Jesus. In a world where people are longing for new ways to relate, where they are realizing that it is friendship not finance that makes for human happiness, the quality of our common life matters, it matters more than we can possibly know.



So let's build a new world, a fair world, a world based not on spreadsheets but on **relationships of love. And let's start that work right here, right now. Amen.**

