

## God-bearers all

Thursday 21 July, 2016

*A sermon preached by the Revd Canon Kenneth Letts, one time Archdeacon of France and Anglican Chaplain of Nice, on the occasion of a commemorative evensong with prayers for the people of Nice, Ankara & Istanbul.*

*Au Nom du + Père et du Fils et du Saint Esprit. Amen*

*Que dire?* What can be said? In the face of such mindless violence, whenever and wherever it happens, one can only say *No; this is not right*. Even in the face of our pervasive moral relativism, we should say *No; this is not right*. People of good-will are appalled at such events no matter where or when they happen, yet if one can visualise the place, or if one has actually experienced the place, then there is a further dimension.

But for us, in this continent which is the Antipodes to these events, there is a particular difficulty. I could tell you that it all happened not 150 yards from where I lived for 20 years; I could tell you that, had it happened three years ago, I would have been in that place, at that time; but that is still at one remove from your experience. I shall give you a more concrete picture. As Melbourne is, so Nice lies around a bay *la Baie des Anges*, which has a long promenade running around its perimeter. What you may not know is that Beaconsfield Parade, that lovely boulevard which runs between Port Melbourne and St Kilda, Beaconsfield Parade was designed as a replica of the *Promenade des Anglais* in Nice: the same broad carriageways, the same broad footpath between the road and the beach. And if you can imagine the section between Kerferd Road in Albert Park and Fitzroy Street in St Kilda crowded with thousands of people, then you will begin to have an idea of what it might have been like should a huge truck cut a deadly swathe along those two kilometres of footpath.

It is more poignant still. The *Promenade* was born, in the 1820's, not because of a municipal road-building project, but out of a compassionate response by the Anglican Christians of Nice to the plight of their neighbours. The parish priest of the time, Fr Way, convinced his parishioners that they had a responsibility to those around them who were unemployed and in need. And so they created a subscription fund which enabled employment for the unemployed of Nice at that time. It was an act of solidarity, and so the *Promenade des Anglais*, which would be written about and painted by every subsequent generation, was begun.

That memory of generosity and Christian vocation speaks louder of good-will, redemption and reconciliation than the insanity of one sad, deluded, troubled young man who sought personal redemption through a *soi-disant* hallowing of death, murder and self-immolation. There is a further difficulty, not one determined by geographic distance. In this country, it seems to me, we live in an age of but moderate virtue and scarcely moderate vice, and we are desirous to keep excesses of passion or madness at a distance. In the light of the events of last Thursday, the danger is that, seeing that we are not the ones dead, we shall return unchanged to our affairs. This surely is folly. There must be change, not simply of minds, nor of methodology, nor of policy, but a change of heart. We must learn what there is to be learned by heart, or else the meaning will slip away as easily as the water flows from the pebbles around the *Baie des Anges*. Without a change of heart, our tribal choices will simply continue to alternate between futile speculation and unconsidered action.

Is all this too fanciful? too theoretical? too romantic? I think not. I can only speak as a Christian priest whose understanding has been shaped, not simply by the affairs of men, but by the affairs of God.

At the close of this calendar year, as of every calendar year, this building will be packed to overflowing, several times in one day. The day is called Christmass Day; and on that day, the Christian Church celebrates an event that has changed our understanding of the world. At Christmass-tide, when we celebrate the Incarnation of God, we hear how an ordinary woman, one like us, became, through love and faith, the *Theotokos*, the God-Bearer, the channel through whom the Love of God was made visible; and we also hear

of how her Child was received with joy by those of good will; for the Child is God who, in an overflowing act of love and solidarity, takes our humanity, with all its pain and all its joy, to himself for all eternity.

The Son of Mary, when grown up, once looked with love and tears upon the holy city of Jerusalem and commented that if only she had known the things that belonged to her peace. It is those things that we must seek, the things that belong to our peace, and like Ulysses of old, we must not be turned away from our purpose either by length of years, or difficulty of passage, or by the sirens' call to ephemeral and transitory comfort.

400 years ago, a young French philosopher called Blaise Pascal set out a challenge for us based on his Christian understanding that in Christ, God and Man are one. '*Christ is in agony until the end of time*', he said, '*and what right have we to sleep?*' How we answer that question, both personally and communally, may well determine the future of this world.

*Agneau de Dieu, qui enlèves le péché du monde, donne-nous a paix.*

[Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, grant us peace.]