

Solemn Commemoration for the Victims in Tunisia

12th April 2016

Westminster Abbey

The Dean

Just before this service began, Prince Harry laid a wreath of white flowers at the Innocent Victims memorial outside the west door, which has been a place for the commemoration of so many innocent victims in the last twenty years. In a few minutes' time, following the anthem to be sung by the choir, we shall witness an act of solemn commemoration of the thirty one people from all parts of this United Kingdom who died in terrorist attacks in Tunisia. Thirty one candles, representing each of those whose lives were cruelly taken from them on 18th March and 26th June last year, will be carried in silence by close relations or friends of those who died, from the Grave of the Unknown Warrior just inside the west door of the Abbey. The candles will each be placed on the high altar. In this act of remembrance we shall commend to the love and care of almighty God those who have died and whom still we love. Let us remember alongside them those of other nationalities who died on those days and those who were injured, and all who still suffer as a result of the trauma of those days. We should also give thanks for the people who helped the victims.

For the people who were there, this commemoration will call vividly to mind the experience of those days. Those of us who were not there can have little real understanding of the horror of it. But it seems to have been so random. One was taken and another left. The Telegraph reported that 'a young blonde woman in a white bikini walked alone through the stretch of sand. One by one, she placed red and white roses in a floral

tribute on an overturned sun lounge with a handwritten message in English and German that simply read *Why? Warum?*

Why? is the one question that remains when all the other questions have been answered. *Why?* The security services may have clear answers as to how particular people had been chosen to make the attacks, how they had been trained and prepared, who had done the planning and who had decided on Tunisia. But the question *Why?* is harder. Why did these particular events happen on these particular days to these particular people? And not to others? Why did others escape and not those who died?

Why? is the inevitable question when seemingly random things happen. These questions range from the trivial to the profound? Why did I forget my keys? Why didn't I smell the gas? Why did I fall for a liar? Why was she born with a life-limiting condition? Why didn't I choose to go on holiday somewhere else? Or some other time? Why her and not me?

Many years ago, when I was a parish priest, I was asked to take the funeral of a three-year old child, who had fallen off a balcony. The child's mother had been nearby but had been distracted for a moment. She had not seen her child's dangerous exploration. Inevitably she blamed herself. Perhaps that's understandable. But it's also unreasonable. Plenty of parents have been distracted for a moment from watching an exploring child without such an unhappy result. It is not necessary or helpful to blame ourselves.

But we do want to understand. We do want to know the answer to the question *Why?* We want an explanation. So it's tempting to put it all down to fate. We might say it was fated to happen; it was in the stars; the day of your death is set and nothing can withstand the fates or the stars. I

don't believe in lucky stars or unlucky stars or fate. Nothing in life is inevitable, except that one day we shall all die. But it is not fate that decides.

So, is the answer that it was an act of God? God decided this day and not that, this one and not that. I can't believe that either. God's plan is for life and love not for sin and death.

There is an ancient story in the bible that people told one another many centuries ago. Its purpose was to explain the presence of sin and death. They were sure that death had not been willed by God. God had made a beautiful world for people to live in. They could have lived in peace and plenty, in harmony with one another and with God for ever. That is what God wanted. But, somehow men and women had other ideas. They disobeyed God and soon brother was killing brother out of bitter rivalry.

For over a thousand years, Christians have been gathering every year in this place to celebrate Easter, as we did two and a half weeks ago. On Good Friday, we commemorated the death on a cross of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The death he suffered was as real as any other death. Jesus pleaded with his Father to avoid death: he was arrested; he was mocked; he was falsely tried; he was whipped and crowned with thorns and made to carry his cross; he died in agony. In the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, God himself shared the pain and suffering at its most acute. God experienced what it is like to lose a loved one. God knows and understands suffering and death in the most tragic circumstances.

And God can and does bring new life and hope. On Easter Day, we celebrated the fact that God had defeated death, raising his Son Jesus Christ to new life. His promise for all is the gift of eternal life, new life beyond death, a life of light and peace with God.

People have to choose and have the freedom to choose. Some will follow the way of light and peace. Tragically others will follow the way of darkness and destruction. Our prayer today is for the defeat of darkness and destruction and that light and peace may have the victory.