

2010 Chichester St Paul Patronal Festival

"I am Jesus, and you are persecuting me."

A couple of years ago, at least 6 ordinary citizens of Nakuru, the cathedral city of one of our twinned dioceses in Kenya were killed in the ongoing violence following the disputed elections the previous month. Janet and I had been in Nakuru just a few months previously.

It may sound rather callous to say it, but I picked that incident almost at random - especially as it wasn't the only atrocity perpetrated in Kenya at that time. Earlier the same month there had also a massacre in Eldoret where 50 women and children were burnt to death in a church. Just another in the long line of any number of atrocities committed in every week in every year in any number of countries in the pursuit of any number of causes. And of course Wednesday this week is Holocaust Memorial Day, the anniversary of the day in 1945 when the Red Army liberated Auschwitz.

Being an example of a wider phenomenon does not detract from its awfulness or the heartache caused to the victims of that particular outrage and their families, but it does help us remember the lengths to which human beings will go in the interests of their religious and political beliefs.

I was put in mind of that a few weeks ago when I stood in the place where according to tradition Saul of Tarsus had the blinding vision of Jesus that led to his conversion to become St Paul we celebrate today. It wasn't actually only St Paul I was thinking about then, because the place of his conversion is overlooked by the Golan Heights, still a painful image of the tragedy of the middle east.

But it is of course Paul who mainly concerns us today. As Saul he had been a strong supporter of the Jerusalem campaign against the early Christian community.

Never one to do anything by halves, it was he who stood by and guarded the cloaks while Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was being stoned to death. It was he who, on his own admission, spearheaded the extension of the persecution.

And it was while he was on his way to Damascus to spread his message of religious bigotry and murder there that Jesus appeared to him.

I'm not going to spend any time trying to work out the psychological significance of all this. I think it is enough to remember the old saying "The bigger they are, the heavier they fall".

Whatever the details, the simple fact is that Paul, fanatical persecutor of the church, found himself face to face with Jesus.

What must have been like for him, who had devoted himself to killing for God, to hear God saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

What would it be like for you and for me to come face to face with the One, the God we think we worship, and hear him say, in respect of the contempt and scorn I so often show to others, "John, why are you persecuting me?"

It is so easy to be absolutely certain that we are right and as a result to find ourselves opposing the only one who is truly right. It may also only be by bringing us to a crisis that God will show us how wrong we are. Just think about the hatreds of your life - you may not even recognise them as hatreds. Our human capacity for self-deception is almost boundless. How often we either justify our sins against charity by claiming they are virtues in defence of truth or pretend that our wrongdoings aren't really all that serious. But therein lies the real skill of the Devil.

Never forget, that by becoming human God's own creative Word made himself everyone. Every act of hatred and cruelty is an act of hatred and cruelty to Jesus.

Now I think this is all directly relevant not only to today's celebration of the Conversion of St Paul and your Patronal festival, but also to another theme of this Sunday - Christian unity.

Our sins against our Christian brothers and sisters are sins against Jesus. We do not need to look back to the terrible times of persecution when Protestant burnt Catholic, Catholic burnt Protestant, and Anglican imprisoned or exiled Dissenter. As I say, we do not need to look back. There is quite enough bigotry in our own day.

Nor do we need to look at anyone else - now, as the apostle said, it is time for judgment to begin, with the household of God. As this annual week of prayer for Christian Unity, we need do no more than examine our own lives and attitudes - and having done so to fall in penitence before the Lord whom we thought we were honouring, but were so often persecuting.

But what has this to do with the violence we see all around the world? Just this. God looks at us, all of us, his beloved children, and grieves as he sees our mutual hostility. As Christians we claim to follow Jesus, who - as St Paul says - broke down in his own body the dividing wall that separated people of different religions and races from each other. The violence of the world is not worse when it involves us than when it involves other people. All human beings are made in the image of God, and are called to be his beloved children. If Christianity has any truth in itself, it lies somewhere around this point.

If we do not in our own fellowship try to live that out we must expect to hear Jesus speaking to us in the same agonised tones in which he spoke to Paul on the road to Damascus. The call to Jesus' disciples to unity is not a religious luxury. It is an indication of whether we are serious or not both about our faith and whether we want to play our part in overcoming the violence of the world.

As an ancient prayer puts it:

O God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Saviour,

the Prince of Peace: Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions. Take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatsoever else may hinder us from godly unity and concord; that, as there is but one Body and one Spirit and one hope of our calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, so may we be all of one heart and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, and may with one mind and one mouth glorify thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord.