

Second Sunday after Trinity

10th June

Some words of Psalm 139:

Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night.

How do we cope with tragedy? All of us want to live happy, peaceful and rewarding lives, and for the most part we do. But occasionally the dark fingers of tragedy grab us by the throat and insinuate themselves into our lives. And when this happens everything is shaken, normality goes out of the window; we get caught up in a whirlpool in which all the familiar props of our lives are cast aside; we become listless, rootless, directionless. Tragedy can stalk us at every level of life.

All of us live our lives in various circles of existence. We are part of the human family, a global environment, and when tragedy strikes here we are conscious of it striking on a global scale: an aircraft crash, a volcanic eruption, a terrorist outrage. For some people, of course, where the tragedy happens is extremely local, but for most of us it happens in far away places. We are shocked by the nature of the event and its scale, but its personal impact can be limited.

Then we have national tragedies that can evoke more of a national response. Thursday this week is the first anniversary of the terrible fire at Grenfell Towers in North Kensington. We looked on with horror as the building was engulfed with flames, and in the immediate aftermath the extent of the human tragedy, and the human response, was palpable and heart-rending. The proximity of the event meant that this was something that affected us all more deeply than if it happened on the other side of the world: it shouldn't – tragedies are tragedies wherever they occur – but it does.

And in Cornwall the response was warm and effective: Cornwall Hugs Grenfell, the charity founded by Esmé Page, one of our choir mums, offering holidays in Cornwall to those affected by the tragedy, has been more than a shaft of light to offer to those wrapped around in the darkness of the tragedy, and offers a hopeful, human response to those caught up in the horror. That hope is given audible expression in the song especially commissioned by CFG of the composer Philip Stopford and the poet Andrew Longfield and sung by our choristers, which has been released on many

media platforms this weekend. Do listen to it – the reference is given in the pew sheet.

And tragedy can be shockingly, devastatingly personal. Last weekend, following the joyous installation of canons' service, a lady fell sustaining a fatal head injury. It has left us all in a state of shock, and, as I said at the beginning of the service, our love and prayers go out to the lady's husband, family and friends. From a global point of view, this will not make the news, but for the people concerned the darkness is overwhelming and devastating. There is no distance between you and the tragedy itself. It sits on you like a motionless weight.

And we have to live with it, we have to live with the fact that our lives are in a whirlpool and the darkness is a feature of our lives. It will affect us, permanently; we may never be the same again. And this is what the Psalmist is apparently referring to when he, or possibly she, says 'the darkness will cover me, and the light around me become night.'

But that is not all what the Psalmist says. This is the starkly beautiful Psalm 139, perhaps the most profound psalm in the whole 150 set. 'O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.' This is the human being who knows that he is before God, and that God is the centre of his life, provoking and prodding him in the right direction: 'Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.'

And this trust in God is not just for the good times, when things are going well. After all, it is the easiest thing to see God behind it all if we are doing well in life, like the Pharisee in St Luke's Gospel, who compared himself to the poor, benighted tax collector. Yet when things do go wrong, when things take a tragic turn, the Psalmist understands that God has not abandoned his creation: for he begins the section about the darkness covering me with a conditional: '*If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.*'

This does not mean that God does not feel the darkness or the pain; his Son, Jesus, truly suffered on the Cross; God is not immune from the suffering of his own Son,

and the suffering of the whole of his creation. But what God shows, in the Resurrection, in the hope of the Gospel, is to offer nothing in return to the pain of suffering, the darkness of tragedy, but limitless, unutterable love. The darkness may pervade us in the heart of tragedy, but the light of Christ, the love of God, is the only response God can make.

Of course, we may not be able to see the light; the darkness can act as a shroud that makes even the light of God impenetrable. In the aftermath of tragedy all sorts of broiling emotions can come to the surface, especially anger. And the Psalmist recognises this too; after 18 verses of beautiful, lyrical poetry, we have a four-verse rant that demands that God duffs up the writer's enemies. He is honest enough to know that destructive emotions lurk below the surface as well as beautiful aspirations, and they have to come before God as well.

But the prevalence of the darkness does not mean that the light isn't there. It can be manifested in any number of ways: a word of sympathy, the tears of love, the silent hug, a video of young singers singing a beautiful song of hope. And that light, that love, will seep through: the darkness will not overcome it.

In the end it is all about the beauty of God's love in creation; we feel tragedy because we feel love, we are captured by the extraordinary gift of God, who is love: 'I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works.' And that has to be the ultimate response to tragedy. We do live in a world where we are, sadly and sometimes brutally, conscious of the fragility of that creation, but that creation is nothing if not the theatre of God's dreams, the expression he makes of his constant desire to love and to bring into being creatures of love. That is why we celebrate their presence in our lives, and that is why we feel their loss. Creation *is* wonderful. It is the expression of God for us to enjoy his love, his very self in fact. After all, God *is* love. And if the love and the light breaks through it will have an ineffable, transfiguring change. That is what we hope for. That is what we live for. Despite the darkness, which will never have the last word, or the last song.