

The Hurt and the Damage: Letting Horror Turn into Wisdom

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1. The Horror

This community has been through a profound experience of horror, violence, and death. Four months have passed, but for some people the events are an everyday, almost every-moment reality. This has been a wound not just in your body but in your soul. Three people – Bart, Jane, and Sharon – are dead. Their loved ones and all who knew them have had their hearts torn in two. Eighteen people – the survivors – have been through a traumatic experience they will never fully be able to erase from their consciousness. This community, this church, has known a depth of pain that, while shared with the doleful rollcall across the nation of communities wounded in this way, it has no words, no gestures, no monuments to express.

Part of the bewilderment is that there seems no meaning to this pointless event, no logic, no context, no narrative within which this can be placed that renders it comprehensible, digestible, remotely plausible. I want tonight to honour your courage in coming together to ponder some of the most painful realities in your lives. I'm particularly thinking of those closest to these horrifying events. I want to thank you for your trust in me to be your guide on that path for the next hour and a half. I hope I can honour your trust in believing what we're doing together tonight constitutes a path that leads to peace. I want to stay with you in this place of dismay and explore what we might call routes out of the forest, possible trails that might lead to clarity, understanding, and most of all some degree of empowerment amid your sense of helplessness.

I suspect your biggest fear tonight is that I'm going to impose a story or structure on the events of June 16 that contravenes your own painstaking efforts to come to terms with what's happened. I want to reassure you I'm not going to do that. Indeed what I plan to do is to recognise that we have a variety of strategies for making meaning, and in a crisis we each tend to revert to the structure of meaning we're most at home in. My central point is that the way most of us make meaning is through telling ourselves a story. Part of the confusion of the last four months is our difficulty in telling ourselves a story that makes any sense. Without such a story we don't know how to act, we don't know what part we're playing, we feel paralysed and exhausted without feeling we're doing anything. So tonight I'm going to evaluate what kind of stories we're inclined to tell ourselves and which among them might make most sense for us today. My overall purpose is to enable you to begin to turn horror into wisdom and thus start to release the power these events have over this community.

2. The Struggle for Meaning

I want now to focus on four words that I suppose summarise the aftermath of this unspeakable event, and to examine with you how each of those words leads to its own sequence of reactions and behaviours.

The first word is *powerlessness*. We don't go around with bullet-proof vests. We don't have armed guards in every room of our church, house, shopping mall or gas station. In a society where guns are common and the licence system is weak, we are vulnerable to a gun being in the hand of a troubled, malicious or unscrupulous person. Because we find powerlessness unbearable, one reaction in the face of the event of June 16 is to try to give ourselves back agency. We could have stopped it. Maybe we feel guilty because we knew the perpetrator, saw his strange behaviour, perhaps spoke with him or realised he was a person with a dangerous relationship with guns. Maybe we should turn our church into a fortress or filter those engaged in church activities. I want you to consider how taking on guilt or imagining you could prevent such an event are completely understandable but ultimately misguided attempts to hold onto some sense of our own power in the midst of depleting powerlessness. Guilt is a way of saying 'I could have been the hero in this story.' Prevention is a way of saying 'I can keep all of life under control.' Part of learning from this terrible event is that neither of those things are true. Maturity isn't about power and control: it's about learning to live with our own powerlessness – in the end our own death. June 16 isn't about a security breach or a procedure lapse. It's about how a community built on trust and

hospitality can be vulnerable, in this case terrifyingly vulnerable, to those whose lives are damagingly out of control.

And that brings us to our second word: *violation*. June 16 was a profound violation of everything this community holds dear. Jesus called his disciples by the Galilean shore. They left their homes and livelihoods and began to walk the way of peace, of love, of gentleness, of repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and healing, of laying down their lives and of being raised to eternal life. We don't tend to do the sandals and leaving home and livelihood part so much these days, but the rest we're as committed to as the early disciples were, and we build churches like St Stephen's to be centres in which we gather to express and renew our faith and places where we build one another up as one body. We know we remain fallen and fragile human beings, but a place like St Stephen's is one in which we seek to be our better selves and reimagine the world and our lives as ones of grace and truth. For the parish hall to be turned in a matter of seconds into a theatre of violence and murder is a violation of this place, of the reason it was built, of the faith of the people who built it and fostered faith in this city over generations, and of our very faith itself, all the way back to the first disciples and to Jesus himself. It's something we feel not in our heads but in our guts. It makes us feel sick. It's like an allergic reaction: our bodies and souls can't assimilate this ghastly event. It's literally revolting. It cuts to the core of our identity as Christians and everything we want this place to be and to stand for.

Which brings me to a third word – a word that might seem strange or inappropriate, especially given the outpouring of kindness and appreciation and solidarity from so many communities around the state and country. That word is *humiliation*. No one is saying that word. But no one wants to be a person or community that others feel sorry for, that others cross the road because they don't know how to speak to, that others eventually get fed up with because they can't believe you haven't moved on and you're still devastated. This is supposed to be a successful church, whatever that means, a growing church, a church with dignified liturgy and vibrant children and youth programmes and lively fellowship and generous giving and thoughtful formation and conscientious social outreach. And yet its outward flourishing is now punctured by this indescribable horror, that undermines, contravenes and poisons its whole *raison d'être*. Is Christianity a pitiful attempt to redeem what is fundamentally, irredeemably a violent, deathly struggle for existence and ascendancy? Are our attempts to live together in generosity, kindness, faithfulness and peace and form a community of beauty, truth and goodness a pathetic endeavour in the face of human evil and the inevitability of death? There can't be many in this hall tonight who in the last four months haven't asked themselves such questions.

The reality is, feelings of powerlessness, violation and humiliation are literally *unbearable*. We can't function if our sense of our own agency, purity and dignity are so deeply inhibited. We're bound to live in denial and fantasy if the reality in front of us is so horrendous. But once these dramatic storm clouds have begun to separate just a little, what abides is a profound *sadness*. That sadness is the fourth word. Three precious, devoted, kind, gentle much-loved people – Bart, Jane, and Sharon – have died. Yes, they've died in a gruesome, ghastly way; but the real point is, they've died. Yes, we trust we shall see them again in the city of God's glory; but we won't see them among us here again, we never had the chance to say goodbye, we think of them whenever we do the things or share the occasions they used to do and share; and those close to them are in the midst of harrowing grief, not helped by police investigations, media attention and the public nature of the June 16 event. Sadness is not an illness: grief is the price we pay for love. But waking up every day to the thudding realisation that June 16 is real, has happened, and will scar this community for a generation is a cause for deep and seemingly endless sadness.

Before I move on, I want to explain the distinction made in my title. Hurt and damage are closely related; but they're not the same thing. When someone has been murdered, there's the grief, fear, dismay, anger and harrowing loss among those left behind. That's the *hurt*, and, while it's profound, permanent, and powerful, it can over time begin to find a place among other hurts in one's own life and in the world. But there's also the physical reality of a person no longer being alive. That's something no one can do a single thing to change. It's unalterable. That's the *damage*. This is why we have to be careful about using words like healing. Healing only refers to hurt: it's an almost meaningless word when the wound is deep and new, but there may come a time when it might be a relevant and even helpful word. I suspect that time is quite some way in the future, and only those bearing the wound will know when's the time to refer to it. Impatience or imposition makes things worse, not better. But as to the damage, healing is a completely meaningless word, even an insult. No amount of healing can bring these three precious people back. A broken limb can heal; a severed limb can't. That doesn't mean we have to be stuck forever, mesmerised by the unalterable damage; it just means we have to look elsewhere for language, metaphors and processes to describe what we're hoping may in time come to pass. Hence my subtitle,

letting horror turn into wisdom. We need to recognise, painfully and slowly, but soberly, honestly and realistically, what can change and what can't, and put our energies towards where transformation can still occur, ghastly as this situation is and will in many senses always remain. That's what tonight is about.

3. Story

More than 30 years ago, at the instigation of a faithful yet quirky priest in Edinburgh, Scotland, I read a book by James Hopewell called *Congregation*. Hopewell speaks movingly about his experience of cancer, the disease that had killed him by the time the book was published. In a memorable passage, he describes his various hospital visitors. He groups them into four categories – not by the way he came to know them, nor by their method of expressing compassion, nor by their frequency of coming to his bedside. Instead, he groups them by the kind of story they told. Now it may be strange to think that a person who comes to see you in hospital tells you a story. But Hopewell describes how, listening beneath the questions his visitors asked and the things they shared, he perceived the story into which they each inserted his experience.

The four kinds of story Hopewell describes are derived from a model created by the Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye. In Frye's marvellous 1957 book *Anatomy of Criticism*, he speaks of four kinds of story. The first is comedy. In a comedy, the point is not about humour, but about the way the crisis of the plot is resolved by the introduction of new information. Problems are never fundamental; instead, they arise out of misunderstanding. In a comedy, the two main characters are twins separated at birth or the fallout between the neighbours is healed when a third person returns from abroad with a vital clue that explains everything. So a comic story is one in which there's no resignation in the face of events; on the contrary, those visiting Hopewell with a comic imagination were continually anticipating a cure for cancer that would reverse his terminal prognosis or trusting that a transformation in his diet would make everything better.

The second kind of story is a romance. Characters in a romance tend to be of noble birth, often discovering their mysterious ancestry later in life. They do wondrous things, beating off dragons, falling hopelessly in love with maidens they rescue from turrets in impenetrable castles, or overcoming daunting tests, often in threes. I love the line where Frye says, 'In a romance, no one asks who pays for the hero's accommodation.' Hopewell found that some of his visitors saw his cancer as a matter of spiritual warfare. Evil, they said, had entered his body, and must be defeated by prayer, deliverance, even exorcism. Everything about his illness was not merely the weakness of the human body but a cosmic clash of life against death. In spite of Hopewell's scepticism, the bold language and dramatic claims made him feel rather small for not inhabiting such a colourful world and ultimately something of a failure for not experiencing a stunning cure.

The third kind of story is tragedy. Tragedy is the opposite of comedy. Whereas in comedy, nothing is so fixed that it can't be resolved through new discovery, insight or information, in tragedy, everything is fixed. Tragedies usually concern the contravention of some unbreakable law of the earth or the heavens, after which no amount of mitigating activity can reverse the inevitable catastrophe. Whether you knew you were breaking that commandment isn't the point: the point is that existence has laws, and if they're broken, recompense has to be made. Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother: though ignorant of both crimes, he has hell to pay. Like romance, tragedy is on a grand stage, usually with noble protagonists. Hopewell found that some of his visitors regarded cancer as some kind of divine punishment, whether for human failings like smoking, lack of exercise or poor diet, or for some more elevated wrong such as a nation turning away from God or migration to the cities and neglect of the soil. Tragedy is about being trapped, and ultimately learning more about the way things cosmically are – like Creon in *Antigone*, who through suffering becomes wise.

The final kind of story is irony, or satire. Irony is a kind of subversion of story. Like comedy, it's about ordinary people, not the grandees. It's the opposite of romance. Whereas romance perceives everything as part of a grand drama, with magnificent battles and glorious outcomes, irony is alert to the randomness of things, the role of luck, surprise and accident, the way with one change in circumstance, the whole story could have been completely different. But irony never supposes that but for that one change of circumstance, things would have turned out well; it points out how that could have triggered another unexpected turn of events, in a cascade of the unknown and the unpredictable. Hopewell found himself most at home with visitors who perceived the role of chance in his illness, the convergence of factors in his own DNA with factors in his own habits and habitat. He eventually

found himself somewhat resentful of those who sought to impose their prescribed story on his reality, and found more honesty in the ironic play of the amusing and the curious. Yet he found something missing from irony: irony seemed so concerned to protect itself from being proved wrong, that it never gave him the emotional warmth and solidarity he found in the other three kinds of visitors. Irony seemed, in the end, to be a kind of suit of armour to prevent deep and contrasting emotions from ever reaching his heart.

I have found Frye's description of these four kinds of stories and Hopewell's identification of the way different people strive to make sense of the grief of a friend slowly dying of cancer to be one of the most significant lenses through which to understand what people are undergoing in adversity and how they understand and make sense of what is happening around them. This was apparent to me just three weeks after my ordination, when a gas explosion took place that put several members of my congregation and community in hospital with grievous and disfiguring burns. As I spoke with people at different removes from the terrifying event, I began to discern for myself these four kinds of stories in the way people talked about the explosion. For those with a comic approach, it was a health and safety issue with a stove on a campsite and better certification and training, together with medical care for those injured, were what mattered. For the romantics, this was a chance for our church to hold these poor people to our heart, and perhaps to experience a revival in faith as the wider community realised how much we loved each other and how the Holy Spirit embraced everyone involved. For those who saw things through the lens of tragedy, it was yet another example of how happiness can't last, that working-class people face challenges in life and always have and always will, and how we must try to stick together and not complain and not get any ideas that things were likely to change. For the ironists, of whom there were few, this was an unlucky event that might yet have some positive outcomes, if those injured were reintegrated into the community and if those organising trips like this paid more attention to what could go wrong.

I've never been more conscious of the significance of story than in the recent covid-19 pandemic. It was easy to see how people's dismay was not just about the prospect of catching the virus but about what kind of story they were in. At the beginning it seemed to be lockdown-easing-recovery. Then we found it was going lockdown-easing-confusion-economic peril-recovery. Then it was lockdown-easing-confusion-further lockdown. The search for story was exhausting and bewildering. But invariably people superimposed their pre-existing story on the baffling circumstances around them. In relation to the pandemic, for a tragic account, our misuse of creation and hubristic globalisation made us vulnerable to the virus. It would take us all down in the end. In a romantic account, we could discover ways to outwit the virus and flourish regardless; alternatively it was all a big international hoax or conspiracy. In a comic account, it was all about simply finding a vaccine and distributing it; then all would be fine. People's fury at those who refused to be vaccinated was in large part a demand that everyone subscribe to their version of what story we were in. In an irony, blundering officials became ridiculous, regulations became contradictory, society was humiliated and the truth behind our commitments was exposed.

During the pandemic I also became aware of how much the role of the leader is to be chief storyteller, and how much of encouraging and inspiring your people is about telling a story in which they can belong and find meaning and understand their role and feel they matter and are not forgotten. So you'll understand why, as I seek to honour the invitation to reflect about June 16 with your community, I find myself drawn to exploring what kind of a story you think you're in, and how much that sense of story affects the way June 16 will play in your memory, imagination and hope as you continue to walk as God's people.

4. Story and Gospel

Before examining how you may think of your story, and especially so in the light of June 16, I want to pause and explore the connections between the four kinds of story and the gospel story.

At first sight the gospel is a comic story. Jesus comes among the common people, does wondrous things, gets into trouble and it seems all is lost but God steps in and raises him and all is well ever after. But this version of the story fails on one fundamental issue: the trouble Jesus gets into isn't a failure of technology or a lack of key information or a misunderstanding based on originally good intentions. Instead, what takes Jesus to the cross is everything that we comprehend by the terms sin and evil. Comic stories have no facility for dealing with genuine malice, except by trying to manage it and insure against it and distract it. This isn't a story like that. We may call comedy a contemporary distortion of the gospel that seeks to make Christianity an additional tool to further today's project of mastering the world by creating methods and technologies to fix every imaginable problem.

Many people see the gospel as a tragic story, portraying God as a distant deity whose laws must not be broken. In this version the Jews broke God's covenant, paid the price, and we will do so too if we don't adhere to Jesus' teachings and example. While Jesus offers us the path of holiness, if we walk elsewhere, we're doomed. In the more extreme version known as double predestination, we're all doomed, whether to heaven or hell, and our mistake is to question, to wonder or to will things otherwise. This is a parody of the gospel of grace, but has been widely influential and remains so even today. We may call tragedy a historic distortion of the gospel that subsumed Christianity into a Stoic project of accepting and coming to terms with the fixtures of created existence that humanity couldn't change.

More promising is to see the gospel as a romantic story, where Jesus turns out to be of high birth, indeed the highest, and proceeds through a series of challenges to reach Jerusalem, where despite terror and torture, he ultimately prevails. The breathless quality of the gospel narratives encourages a sense of drama and adventure, and the realm of miracle and angelic beings is never far away.

Also fruitful is to see the many levels of irony in the gospel story, fundamentally based on the paradox of its being a human tragedy yet a divine comedy. The incomprehension of the disciples, the foolishness of Herod and the Jerusalem authorities, and the stumbling, fitful recognition of the crowd provide the backdrop and contrast with the overwhelming grace of God in Christ, a gift the world cannot see, understand or receive. And yet God's kingdom will prevail, whether humanity is a willing agent of it or not.

What I want this brief survey of story and gospel to demonstrate is that, while comedy and tragedy have historically been the most common ways of the church rendering the gospel story, the truth may well lie more in the territory of romance and irony, and this in coming to understand and make meaning of June 16, we may find ourselves challenging some of the core assumptions of what the gospel has long been taken to entail in a culture like our own. Northrop Frye regards romance and irony as opposites; which may be a warning to us not to expect a direct translation from literary theory to gospel faith, and a reminder that the truth is seldom pure and never simple.

I also want to emphasise that most people's view of the world is a mixture of more than one kind of story. The point is not to focus down into just one of the four stories, but to become more aware of where you instinctively go when making meaning and be prepared to let the gospel story challenge that approach. Because to be a Christian is not to pick up God's story and fix it onto your belt like one key amid a bunch of keys; but to allow yourself to be embraced by and enfolded by God's story so you find your whole meaning by the part the Holy Spirit calls you to play within it. The word Christians have for that process is baptism.

5. June 16 and Gospel Story

All my remarks to this point crystallise in one question: what kind of story is June 16? I want now to look at the experience you've all been through to ponder what kind of story you're beginning to tell about it, but also to recognise the inevitable tensions in a community that arise through the fact that not everyone is telling the same kind of story.

If we start with comedy, it's obviously absurd in the case of June 16 to use the word comedy meaning something funny. But that's not what comedy is at root about. A comic story is one where the problems are technical and circumstantial, and with the right intervention and new information, all is well. This story is on the face of it useless in the face of the horror and grief of June 16. No amount of new information or extra learning can reverse that terrible event and its lasting damage. But those who tell a comic story are seldom deterred by such an obstacle. They'll quickly be saying this is about how to prevent such a thing happening again. They'll be looking to technology to bleep when a gun enters a school or church, to fit all weapons with devices that means they can't be hidden in such precious environments, to arm security guards, train all congregants in self-defence, perhaps to screen all members of the community for suspicious behaviour or dangerous addictions. For a person captivated by a comic story, *there is no problem that can't be fixed*, and any story that doesn't fit this shape simply has to be reconfigured into a problem-solution trajectory. Now I'm not saying there aren't lessons to be learned from June 16 or practical things that could be done differently. But I'm questioning whether a comic story has got what it takes to sit with and truly comprehend what you've been through together. This isn't a situation that can be resolved by better procedure, activism, volunteering and solutions. People are dead.

Families and friendship networks are devastated. A church is in grief. A man's life will now be at best spent behind bars. These things require lament, vigil, sorrow, gentleness, kindness, patience, tenderness. No frenzy of activity can make them come good. This is not a comic story, however many people's profound reflexes it goes against to say so. The first thing to do is to recognise there's nothing you can do.

I'm going to look next at tragedy. In a tragedy, you get on the wrong side of the gods, you're doomed, the fates are against you, there's nothing you can do. People with a tragic world view ask questions like 'What did I do wrong to deserve such a terrible thing to befall my family?' (An ironist would never ask a question like that. It would never occur to an ironic storyteller that there was a reason why anything happened. Things just happen, period. At best God's ways are mysterious and we won't get to decipher them this side of eternity.) Tragedy is absorbed by guilt and culpability. In the case of June 16, tragedy wouldn't be content to blame the perpetrator. It would place the whole event in a much larger context, perhaps of the role of guns in the American imagination, maybe the prevalence of mental illness and the way it can play out in violent demonstrations of aggression, perhaps the sense of powerlessness of a generation of men who lived through the Vietnam War and were damaged by what they did or didn't do there, perhaps an era of disempowerment of a class of person, a race of person, or a kind of person not inheriting the quality or meaning of life to which the postwar optimism had left them feeling entitled. So many novelists and playwrights have described this sense of powerless fury for which perhaps the perpetrator became some kind of a channel.

But just as I sense the comic story is too superficial to do justice to June 16, I think the tragic story is too hopeless to describe what has truly happened in this community since. A tragic story ends with the horror. But your story doesn't end on June 16. This event has evoked love, and faith, and solidarity, and togetherness. It has made people cherish this church more, realise the significance of ordinary acts of neighbourliness and thoughtfulness. It has made you appreciate one another, come together in words and gestures of beauty and truth, deepen your belonging and enrich your hope. I don't think tragedy is the right word to describe June 16. It wasn't foreordained. It wasn't written in the skies. It wasn't the result of some cosmic turning-away from timeless law. It wasn't unfortunate, a misunderstanding, or an accident. I don't think the language of tragedy has much to help us here.

So we don't get much from comedy or tragedy. But I do think there's help to be found elsewhere. Let's move on to romance. Again, it's absurd to suggest June 16 is a romantic story if you take romance to be about falling in love and dreams of happy ever after. But romance doesn't really mean that. It means perceiving life as a series of challenges, in response to which you find within yourself and your community reserves of strength, such that by extraordinary guile or power, or miraculous intervention from above, you overcome each one. Again we must be careful. If comedy fails to take June 16 seriously by ignoring the suffering and grief and instead treating it as a system failure that could be prevented another time, tragedy takes June 16 too seriously by regarding it as the overwhelming event that obliterates any other narrative going on in this community. Romance mustn't make the comic mistake of trying too quickly to move on and find positives and hope and takeaways and learnings. It needs to stay in the place of grief, as we're doing tonight, and as members of this community have done together and alone many times in the last four months, to be still and feel and acknowledge the powerlessness, violation, humiliation and sadness.

But beyond the storm clouds of those four profound reactions, and the time it takes for those clouds to separate a little, what is it we're looking to perceive in the skies above? Here I think romance can help us a great deal. Because what a romantic story does is to refuse to let evil, suffering, death and grief have the last word. Romance is always looking to create a much larger story, in which adversity is the pretext for discovery, setback the threshold of glory, and disaster the entry to transformation. When I pray with those who are in the midst of sickness, grief or despair, I do bear in mind the tragic story that we call on God to be with them in their suffering, just as Christ was with Martha and Mary at the tomb of Lazarus. I also bear in mind the comic story of God bringing about astonishing change in their situation, just as Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. But my real prayer is that they, like Martha and Mary, will see the glory of God. I pray that they will one day look back on this time as a season when they were most fully alive, more grateful than ever before for the birds that chirrup each morning, the taste of water or milk or cornbread, the wonder of having been born; that they will be in this time closer to their family and friends than ever before, able to express affections and articulate sentiments they'd never previously found ways to share; that they'd feel God's presence in a wholly new way, that they'd recognise themselves as God's child, created for God's enjoyment, fulfilled in enjoying God in return. The point is that, in

a romantic story, a disaster or terrible setback can be the beginning of something wonderful, good and true, and not just, as in a tragic story, the end of all hopes, dreams and plans.

I think it's vital that St Stephen's, without being sentimental, too much in a hurry, or in the slightest way diminishing the horror of what took place on June 16, remains open to what the Holy Spirit can do and can create out of this grief and sadness that wouldn't have happened had these awful events not taken place. This is, after all, the heart of the gospel: that God raised Jesus from the horror of crucified death, and that God will likewise raise us however grim our life and grievous our death. Thus we know that God *can do* this and *has done* this and ultimately *will do* this: it becomes less fanciful and wishful to imagine that God is already doing this among us right now in these early months after the horrifying afternoon of June 16.

We're still to reflect on the ironic way of approaching this story. In irony, nothing is what it seems, the powerful are exposed by the weak, the rejected element proves to be the crucial one, and all pretension is dismantled. I'm sure there are details of the way this story came to pass, of the life of the perpetrator, of the last words of those who died and the subsequent events in the lives of survivors and the whole community of which I'm not aware, details that evoke strange coincidences, curious omissions, incongruous consequences, and inscrutable subsequent turns of events. Part of irony is to poke fun at those who too quickly try to make meaning of incomprehensible things or impose structure on an event that defies description. But in a theological perspective, we may reflect on one of the most ironic sentences in the Bible. When the patriarch Jacob finally dies in Egypt, and Joseph's brothers feel a shiver of terror that Joseph, prince of Egypt, will finally exercise revenge on them for abandoning him decades before, Joseph comes up with a statement of understanding, grace and profound theological significance. In as many words, he says, 'You meant it for evil; but God meant it for good.' Not only are the brothers beyond relieved that they're off the hook, having been in panic from the moment the governor of Egypt revealed to them his true identity as their rejected and forgotten brother Joseph; but now they perceive the Holy Spirit's capacity and propensity to weave even our worst destructive failures into God's glorious kingdom.

That's not for one moment to suggest that somehow God intended June 16, as only the most grotesque form of tragic story could suppose; but it is to recognise that God's rhythm is on a much longer cadence than our rhythm, that God's redemption can embrace things our efforts at transformation can only abhor, and that in Christ's passion and death we see God entering into the very worst that human beings can do to one another and astonishingly bringing life and hope and eternal embrace out of even that. The danger with the ironic story is always that it can become so detached, so clever and expert and dispassionate, like a raised eyebrow or a sly grin, that it misses the love and compassion and immersion in the heat of the furnace of pain that would rather be wrong with kindness than right with icy distance. For that reason, we can seldom rely just on the ironic story.

In this case there's no need to. While vital to accept that human life is fragile and fallen, and correct to perceive that God's ways are not our ways, it's important to see June 16 as not just an ironic story of the mysteries of the Holy Spirit, but as a romantic story of how through those days after the event, through these months of grief and intensity and struggle, perhaps everyone here has been alive like never before, aware of the fundamentals of the gospel in new ways, in touch with their dependence on God and one another, and grateful for the simplest gifts of creation and existence, such that this time has been a renewal as well as a disaster. This must never soften our compassion or lessen our attention to those at the centre of this story, the survivors and the families and friends of those murdered. And it must never make us sentimental about the intentions and disturbed actions of the perpetrator.

But in the fullness of time, we understand life principally as a story, and some stories are more helpful and appropriate than others. I believe what is now an unspeakable horror for this community will one day become recognised as a source of true wisdom; that this church will no longer be an object of pity but a fountain of grace; and that June 16 will be seen as the defining moment when the people of St Stephen's discovered what their creed and Eucharist and baptism and footwashing and sending-out to love and serve really mean: for they have a vocation to suffer in their own body the wounds of Christ's passion and death, that they may truly discover themselves to be the body of Christ, and so doing find themselves to be the body of the risen Christ, who stands among those who've deserted him and by whom he's been betrayed, and says, 'I am with you, I am with you as peace, I am with you always, and you will always be with me.'

I have just one more thing to say. I lost a parent when I was a young man. Out of that experience I formulated a motto that has become a guiding star for my life, and I'd be happy to have written on my tombstone. Here it is:

'If it can't be happy, make it beautiful.' I think that sentence sums up my prayer for your community, four months on from June 16. You could call that motto an ironic story; and perhaps you'd be right. The story of June 16 is never going to be a happy story. It's a scar that defaces this church and always will. But one day, maybe in a few years, maybe in a few decades, I hope at least in a few centuries, and I know for certain in God's good and eternal time, that scar will have been woven, painted, grown or shaped into something beautiful. The damage will remain – but the hurt will have been joined with the hurt of other communities in a great wave of resistance and understanding and compassion. The hurt will not have completely gone away, but St Stephen's will be known as a place of kindness, goodness and gentleness. The memories won't have died, but those now in howling agony of grief will become ambassadors of peace, witnesses of a new society, flagbearers of truth.

I have bad news and I have good news. The bad news you know: this will never become happy. The good news I've come to tell you: you can still, in time, with patience, forbearance and love, make it beautiful. I believe you will. And I hope you'll look back on this evening as part of your journey towards doing so.