

Our Easter Message

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, which brought to an end 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland. Growing up in the 1970's and 80's, I was aware from the news of the violence taking place but it was only when I visited Belfast earlier this year that I came face to face with what actually happened. I went as part of a group of clergy on a pilgrimage led by the Archbishop of Canterbury. We met people who had fought on both sides of the conflict, as well as those who worked for peace. What struck me most was the powerful way in which people were identified as *them* or *us*, and that very often being *us* meant being victims of the violence of *them*. We might talk of forgiveness and reconciliation, but these are enormous challenges when you're dealing with people whose family members have been killed by *them*.

On Good Friday, Jesus was the victim of violence stoked by fear and sectarianism. What makes the difference for us today is that he was able, as God, to respond not with the desire for revenge but with genuine forgiveness. "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" Jesus said from the cross. So the cycle of violence is broken. On the streets of Belfast I saw murals on the sides of houses recalling those who were killed during the Troubles. The message seemed to be "don't forget what was done to us here, by them". At Easter we celebrate new life following death and are given the hope that the *them/us* divisions of humanity can be overcome because love is more powerful than death. The risen Jesus shows us that everyone is loved and precious to God so that there is no *them*, but only *us*.

Revd Patrick Taylor
Vicar of the Parish of Stratford-upon-Avon

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