

THE FORGOTTEN 'F' WORD

Speech given by Robin Oake at the CCF Christmas Reception, Monday 4th December 2006.

It is strange that we go to a football stadium and pay for a seat in the *stands* yet here we are in church premises and – for free – instead of *sitting* we stand! I am delighted to be here and to share with you something of my career and connect it with modern day life and Christmas.

When I was a young constable in training, the Sergeant came into the classroom one Saturday morning, wrote the word 'Riots' on the blackboard, suggested some paragraphs we might read for examination purposes and then said that we would never have to deal with a riot – they are a thing of the past. Within 6 weeks of that I was in Notting Hill – in a riot! Then I was in Camden Town in what was known as the St Pancras Rent Riots. In fairly quick succession, I was in Grosvenor Square near the American Embassy, then Red Lion Square, then at the American Airbase in Uxbridge, in Whitehall with the burning of 13 coffins outside 10 Downing Street and later in Brixton – all at some kind of riot or another.

Come with me to Moss Side in Manchester and the last great riot there. It was to be anticipated and one night at about 3am, my wife answered the telephone to hear Sergeant Batty – what a name for a police officer! – say that the wheel had come off. All I heard of the conversation was her reply "Well, put it back on!" It certainly wasn't a joke and by the time I had arrived at the Police Station at about 3.45am, much damage had been done in the streets, fires started and many injuries had been inflicted by a heavy and large mob. During the day, we heard the rumour that the Police Station would be attacked that night and so as Commander, I arranged that all officers except a nucleus should be sent to other locations so that if the rumour were true, instead of being trapped in the building, they might try to rescue us from a better vantage point.

By the time the first brick had come through the front window, Sergeant Batty had been home to sleep and was back on duty and was there to deal with an unconscious drunk which one of my 'rescuing' Constables had arrested! The drunk was laid down in a cell and we did all we could to repel boarders and limit damage. Bricks and stones were one thing but petrol bombs, base-ball bats and other weaponry were painfully difficult to deal with. The ten of us inside the Station were all injured – including the Constable who panicked to the point of being uncontrollable and who I knocked out with one punch so that he wasn't in the way! Police vans and cars, private cars of the officers and all 80 windows bar two were broken, aflame or mutilated. After three hours, we were eventually 'rescued', the TV and radio crews arrived and the interviews were completed, the Chief Constable, Sir James Anderton was aroused from sleep and came to encourage us and then Sergeant Batty to the fore when he yelled, "The drunk!"

Insensible drunks should be visited in the cell every 15 minutes but this fellow had been incarcerated since 9.15pm and it was now gone 5am. Sergeant Batty said to me, "You'd better leave me to deal with this, Sir" and went to the cell wondering if the prisoner was still alive. Fortunately, he was snoring away and woken with much

relief! He had not heard anything of the attack!! Brought to the Charge Room, Sergeant Batty returned his property to him, decided not to charge him and simply said, as he escorted him to the door, "You gave us a lot of trouble last night." The freed man, now in the back Yard, looked at the smouldering vehicles, the broken glass everywhere and signs of battle and simply blurted out, "Did I do all that?!"

I am a little like that for I had a long career in the Police Service starting in the Metropolitan Police - in fact I was in this area later as an Inspector – then at the National Police College, Bramshill on the staff, then to Greater Manchester with periods in Miami and Northern Ireland before my final posting in the Isle of Man; I say, with the drunk, looking back, "Did I do all that?"

I have been privileged to have a very varied career but it was made the more enjoyable, I am convinced, because I joined the Force as a committed Christian. Not that I was under the same roof at home with other Christians. My parents were not converted until much later, and we as children – I had two older sisters – were packed off to the local church and as time went on I sang in the choir and rang the bells for which I received 7/6d (old money) each Sunday. One day, my eldest sister, who was studying Physical Training at College, arrived home for vacation and told us that she had become a Christian. My parents were stunned and eventually Mother said, "But you already are!" For us all, it took some understanding but we soon saw the wonderful difference it had made to Cherry and we realised that there was a change.

Meanwhile, I had joined Crusaders (as they were called then) and went to camp in Studland Bay, Dorset where I was introduced - by the bridge architect and builder, Kenneth Anderson who was Commandant of the Camp - to faith in the Lord Jesus and I received Him into my teen-age life as we knelt by an upturned tea-chest in his tent. My other sister, Wendy was later converted too as were my parents some years later.

The night before I joined the Metropolitan Police, I spent the evening with a man later to be my Best Man when I married Chris, my wife. He was a fellow Christian and an officer stationed in Croydon and his last word to me was simply, "Nail your colours to the mast." I have to say that I was more than a little shy about my faith and certainly not an overt witness but on the first evening the truth was out! The small rooms in which we studied and slept had partitions which left a six-inch gap at the bottom and as I knelt by my bed to read the Bible and pray, I didn't realise that my feet were through into the next cubicle. My colleague who I hardly knew slammed through my door with the words, "What the hell are you doing?" And, "Oh, I'm sorry" But the news spread quickly though not in a harsh way – perhaps amusing would be the right word though my face *was* red I am sure.

I have entitled this evening, "The Forgotten 'F' Word" and I soon learned as a police officer, how scarce it is that people are forgiven. Many of the incidents to which police are called are connected with minor disputes which have escalated when words such as "I'm sorry" or, "I forgive you" would have diffused the situation immediately. Instead of that, we deal with anger, retaliation, revenge, gang-wars, serious assaults, murders, broken marriages and a whole host of other things where the 'F' word is forgotten. For people not involved with policing, they will experience this at home or watching sport – professional and amateur - when immediate retaliation seems to be

the order of the day! I will come back to this suffice to say, at this juncture, Christmas is about forgiveness and the truth of that which is taught in the Lord's – or as I call it, the Disciples – Prayer “.... forgive us our trespasses (or sins) as we forgive those who trespass against us ...” Jesus was saying that He will forgive us in the same proportion as we forgive those who wrong us!

I have for a long time been careful to test the truth and not just take a situation on merit or make an early decision as to its authenticity. Perhaps the best illustration of this was while working in this area during the tensions of the early 70's when we had 52 live devices – bombs – and over 200 hoax calls. My colleague, Roger Goad, was killed by one bomb so they were difficult times. One of the bomb-disposal officers – there were four on loan from the Army – became a good friend but I never got used to his habit of handing me a device to feel its weight so that I could, as Duty Officer, decide how wide to clear the area and make a cordon. Part of that 'feel' was also to agree whether the device was live or a hoax. I soon became knowledgeable enough to recognise the signs!

Thus with my Christian faith. The carol “Hark the Herald Angels sing” has two lines which are particularly pertinent to us for Christmas and illustrate my testing of truth. “Born that man no more may die” and “Born to give us second birth.” I knew that I was a new man – indeed, I will go so far as to say that God made a man of me which is precisely what someone said to me while I was on the beat when I had witnessed to him and given him a New Testament. He evidently read that and not recognising me when I was in a police car, poked his head through the front window and told my colleague and me of his conversion. It was confirmed to me that the Word of God is powerful and life-changing, which I have proved time and time again. I have seen through my career, colleagues of all ranks, prisoners and others who have become new creations – born again Yes, born to give us second birth. But what about that other sentence, “Born that man no more may die”?

Steve, my son, was born again as a teenager when he, with friends, went to see a film called, “A Thief in the Night” which is a scenario which is taught from Scripture that Jesus will return and will surprise us all ‘like a thief in the night’. All who love Him will be taken to meet him and others who don't know him will be left behind. The film depicts this and Steve was so convicted that he didn't know Jesus that he opened up his heart and life and invited Jesus to come in.

Perhaps I may take you into what happened when Steve was killed on duty on Tuesday the 14th January 2003. This is not to draw attention to us as a family but to illustrate my point. I had been in Manchester to visit my daughter who had undergone serious surgery in St Mary's Hospital and my wife was staying at her house to look after my son-in-law and the two young children. I had spoken to Steve by telephone on the Sunday afternoon and during the conversation he had asked me to pray for him on Tuesday as he was expecting a particularly awkward duty. I returned to the Isle of Man. On that eventful Tuesday, Steve had got up at 4am, had his Quiet Time of worship, reading and prayer at his local Poynton Baptist Church so as not to wake the family, and then gone on duty for 6am.

The event went smoothly but by lunch-time, having completed the paper-work, he and others in Special Branch were requested to stay on duty for another incident later

in the afternoon or evening. The briefing was held and it was a joint operation with the uniformed branch. Without going into any detail, Lesley, his wife and my lovely daughter-in-law, telephoned me at about 6.30pm to say that she had just heard that Steve had been involved in an accident and that she was being picked up by police car to take her to North Manchester Hospital. We both coincidentally thought that he had crashed his car having fallen asleep on his way home bearing in mind that he had got up so early.

Some while later, Lesley telephoned me again and was distraught as she simply said, "Robin, Steve has been murdered!" She tried to explain what had happened but the Deputy Chief Constable of Greater Manchester Police took the phone from her and spoke with me and told me what had happened. I was stunned as you can imagine but had the presence of mind to ring my Pastor and then my prayer-partner who came to my house within minutes. The Manx Police Deputy Chief Constable had by then been informed officially of Steve's death and he felt it his duty to come to my home to tell me. He took a Police Woman Inspector with him, not knowing that Chris was in Manchester. Try to imagine his feelings as he buoyed himself to break the news to me – to his former boss.

He arrived at my house to find us kneeling in prayer in the lounge and they immediately joined in. I also had to inform my wife and to do so had to break a strict rule of mine which I had passed on to my staff throughout my career – that was, not to give bad or distressing news over the telephone because one never knows how the recipient will react. However, I realised that the 10 o'clock news would tell the world about Steve's death and I had to let Chris and my other daughter know before then. You can imagine that they were devastated when I spoke with them.

I had little sleep that night but sat up praying and reading Scripture; I was startled by early telephone calls from friends and other family who had heard the news and also a call from the Deputy Chief who suggested a Press Conference early on Wednesday morning to which I agreed. I typed out two A4 size sheets giving the background as I knew it for the journalists who had arrived from England and some of our local newspaper, TV and radio reporters. Then the questions from the floor, one of which was something like, "What do you think of the man who killed your son?" I responded something like this, "I don't know who he is but I am sure I speak on behalf of my family and certainly for myself when I say that I forgive him and I pray that God will." Another voice asked, "You *what?*" I repeated more simply, "I forgive him." Of course, that hit headlines throughout the media.

This genuine forgiveness took from us bitterness, seeking revenge or any sort of retaliation and gave us the peace that only God can give. However, I have to say to you that this was a bitter blow and I want you to know that when a Christian hits rock bottom – as we did as a family – then we find that that rock is Jesus Who gives comfort and strength to cope through His Word and His people. Incredibly, forgiveness is not a big deal to me since I have been forgiven so much in my own life and yet I still marvel that when the crunch came and in that daunting Press Conference, the 'F' word of forgiveness was not forgotten.

"Born that man no more may die" could seem a hollow sentence in these circumstances but at the Celebration of Steve's life and his funeral in Manchester

Cathedral, I was able, in welcoming the thousand or so congregation, to say that as Christians, we never say “Goodbye” because we will see each other again in heaven and I so look forward to meeting and hugging Steve then.

So here was my faith tested to the limit and not found wanting. I have come, therefore, tonight to underline the wonderful truth of Bethlehem when Jesus, Emmanuel, the Name which means “ God with us”, was born as Saviour of the world – which God so loves. He loves each of us here and is willing to forgive us and give us new life as new creations so that we, in turn, will not forget His love nor the healing word, ‘forgive’ when others hurt us.

I pray that you will enjoy the Christmas season and take to heart – not the emotion of my short story nor anything else except that God loves you and in Jesus, gave Himself for you so that you may be forgiven.