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Caroline Cox: Easter message of peace must prevail



On Easter Sunday suicide bombers killed at least 253 people and injured more than 500 at churches and top-end hotels across Sri Lanka. “There are no words with which I can console my people,” the Archbishop of Colombo, Malcolm Ranjith, said in the wake of the attacks. “I don’t know what to say to them. I try. I tried to go to their funerals, and I tried to embrace them and tell them I am with them, but I have no words to say. I am suffering with them.”

During the same weekend there were many Christians being massacred in Nigeria — in Benue, Nasawara and elsewhere — whose fate did not hit the headlines. For years vulnerable farming communities in northern and central-belt states have been targeted by well-armed Islamist Boko Haram militants and, more recently, by Fulani militia. Their churches are burnt. They are massacred, raped or forced to flee. “We are not safe in our homes,” the Archbishop of Jos, Ben Kwashi, told me. “I am raising an alarm — if your government will listen. Lord in your mercy.”

In many countries Christians will have spent Easter suffering persecution, including those kept in horrendous conditions in North Korean concentration camps, prisoners of conscience in China, those under threat as they try to return to their homes in the Nineveh Plains in Iraq after their destruction by Isis, families being pursued by Islamist mobs in Pakistan, and the list goes on. During the 20th century there were

more Christian martyrs than in all the previous centuries combined. There is more persecution of Christians today than ever before.

And yet, although we grieve profoundly with those who suffer, perhaps we should not be surprised: it was ever thus. As TS Eliot wrote: “But the Son of Man is crucified always/ And there shall be Martyrs and Saints” (*Choruses* from *The Rock*).

I was in the historically Armenian land of Nagorno-Karabakh in 1992 when Azerbaijan was attempting the ethnic cleansing of Armenians, firing 400 Grad missiles a day on to the capital city, Stepanakert. I was there when the archbishop’s home received a direct hit and he was nearly killed. I asked him for a message and his response of love is one that we hear wherever it is our privilege to meet Christian friends undergoing persecution. He told me: “Our nation has again begun to find its faith after 70 years of Soviet communism. It is praying in churches, in cellars and on the field of battle, defending its life and the lives of those who are near and dear.

“It is not only the perpetrators of crime and evil who commit sin, but also those who stand by — seeing and knowing — but who do not condemn it or try to avert it. We do not hate — we believe in God. If we want God’s victory, we must love.”

I will never forget the tears in his eyes when he said: “Whatever demonic forces are unleashed against us here or anywhere in the world, we must remember we have a God of love. We must never hate. We must always love.”

It is said that the killings inflicted in Sri Lanka were an act of retaliation for the murder of Muslims in New Zealand. I have many Muslim friends and I know that they would never contemplate such a response of retaliation.

As the Archbishop of Colombo has so clearly cautioned: “I ask all the Sri Lankan people not to take the law into their own hands, but to maintain peace and harmony.” For wherever there is suffering, the redemptive aspect of Christian persecution is the lesson of love.

May the Easter message of peace and forgiveness prevail over the alternative responses of brutality and retaliation for the blessing and benefit of humanity in our world today. And may the words of persecuted Christians around the world inspire, encourage and deepen our own, all-too-often tepid faith.

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