

The scale of the tower block tragedy this week in Latimer Road West London is unprecedented. Several hundred Londoners in a social housing tower block, 24 storeys high, found themselves engulfed in flames in the early hours of the morning. The efforts of hundreds of firefighters, medics and police officers could not save scores of victims from the inferno. The death toll is likely to be over 75.

This is a social disaster which is shaking our country's political establishment to its foundations. Men, women and children have been killed, critically injured and traumatised in homes that should have given them safety, protection and the chance to survive a fire said to have started in a faulty fridge in one flat.

Children were heard screaming for their lives as our capital's brave firefighters, medics and police struggled to save them. Grenfell Tower was home to people who are among our country's poorest and most vulnerable.

There are so many questions to be answered – why? Why? Why? It is quite the case that the implications and truth of what has happened will bring shame to London, and arguably to the country as a whole.

A disaster is a sudden, calamitous event that seriously disrupts the functioning of a community or society and causes human, material, and economic or environmental losses that exceed the community's or society's ability to cope using its own resources.

One gentleman who had suffered the trauma of having his house burn down around him twice (once as a child, and then later in life) wrote a blog on the subject of “what to do in a disaster”, largely to exorcise his demons. His advice to those who go to help in a tragedy is not to engage in talk of silver linings, or other cliched comforting words. He wrote:

“Say just two things: “I’m so, so sorry. How I can help?” That’s all there is to say – then just BE with them. Hold their hand and cry with them. Bring them food and blankets and gift cards and kleenex and listen, really listen to them when they are telling you just how broken they feel. Just be there.

When horrible things happen, what we really want to know is that people love us and are there for us. We want to know that we're not alone, and not forgotten. In the days following a terrible tragedy, we don't want to talk about the silver lining, or to get into deep discussions about God's will, destiny, national pride, or karma. We're damaged, in shock, and in terrible pain. We just need love."

*As the author Jonathan Lockwood Huie wrote:*

*I cannot know the pain you feel.*

*I cannot share your memories or your loss.*

*My words of sympathy are beneath measure, yet  
know that my heart reaches out with love to your heart.*

*And, Hippocrates (known as the "Father of Medicine")  
Cure sometimes, treat often, comfort always.*

*burningdownthehouseblog.com* continues:

"So what do you do when tragedy strikes? Don't hesitate – go ahead and reach out. Send a note, a card, an email, leave a voice message saying, "I just want you to know I'm here for you." Don't talk about how great things are going to be once they're on the other side of this, but do hang on to all that hope and faith and optimism. Hold it in your heart for them, for that day in the future when they do want to talk about it. Someday, it might help them down that long road of recovery. But for now, just love them, and be there in whatever way you can. And believe me, that will be enough."

There will be due time to consider recompense, retribution and the possibility criminal accountability. The framework for this is in place. The provision of long term support for those who have experienced trauma, survival and bereavement by disaster, victims, rescuers and helpers alike will require great courage and humility as well as knowledge and skill.

Now, when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Here is that compassion that moved Him deep down inside. It is a compassion that is primal, part of the essence of His being. The compassion of Jesus is one of the deepest, richest, and most comforting of His qualities.

The reason for this compassion is the state of the people. The words harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd tell us that the people were the constant target of an evil bully. They were like a flock of sheep surrounded by a pack of wolves. The wolves constantly probing, nipping. Which member of the flock is the weakest ... the slowest? Constantly under the pressure of knowing that one false step ... one stumble ... any sign of weakness, and the wolves will have their next meal.

People who are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, and the wolves of the media gather around them, feed their fear and build a frenzy until the lynch mob is set loose baying for blood

One young lady support worker in one of the centres on Latimer Road, wise beyond her years put her finger on this when she appealed to a television reporter to stop stirring this up. I don't know about you, but I often wish they would just stop, listen, and think. People who have been hurt so much are looking for love, peace, comfort, help to trace loved ones, and a new home not to be cannon fodder in someone else's war.

Do you remember the story of the pair of Jesus' followers on the road to Emmaus? They were utterly consumed by despair and grief as they walk away from Jerusalem talking over the events around the crucifixion of Christ, the end of all their hopes and ambitions for a free country, for a great future, and the personal loss of the most extraordinary human being that has ever lived. A figure drew alongside them, one they did not know or recognise, and as he walked with them he sowed the seeds of hope and healing.

Regardless of our faith, when we walk with the suffering, when we shoulder a little of the burden, we become that figure walking alongside the two disciples, the mysterious Christ they cannot see, and hope is born. "Hope flowers in the desert of suffering when it is watered by communities of love, for through them Christ comes, light dawns, and lives shattered in grief and pain find astonishingly that they will live again". (Archbishop Welby)

**God Almighty,  
hear our prayer for those  
who have agonised and died  
suffered and been scarred  
are bewildered and bereaved  
at Grenfell Tower.**

**We give thanks for our emergency services  
and all who are offering care and support.**

**We pray that new homes will be quickly found for those affected,  
and that your healing Spirit will be with them in the days ahead,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

**Afternote:**

**Just after this sermon was delivered the scale of the fires raging mainland Portugal today (18th June) were made known. 62 people have perished in another massive tragedy. Let us pray with our Lord that more “labourers” be found to bring his compassion to those who suffer. (Matthew 9. 38)**

