Assembly 17 December 2007

The Christmas Tree of Hope

It has been a terrible past two weeks in the Mid-West of the United States. On 6th December a 19 year old young man walked into a department store in Omaha, took the elevator to the third floor, and opened fire on shoppers and sales assistants. Eight people were child, the youngest 24 and the oldest 66 years of age. The young man then killed himself. Three days later, on Sunday 9th December, a 24 year old man shot dead two missionary workers in Colorado before driving to a Church a short distance away and opening fire on people as they left the service. Two of the victims died in the car park. The two girls, sisters, age 16 and 18, were walking to their father's car when hit. As in the Omaha incident, the young gunman died at the scene.

Terrible events in what seems to be an on-going list of senseless killings across the world. In most cases, the killers are young men. Rarely do we hear of young women or older people committing such crimes. The police reports suggest that one of the young men at the centre of these latest killings was suffering from mental illness, while the other was angry with society in general.

My thoughts turn to the twelve victims and their families. In Omaha, the shopping centre mall and its department store were full of Christmas shoppers, all trying to find the perfect presents for friends and loved ones. Some would have just arrived; others would have been on their way home, carrying their recently purchased gifts. In Colorado, hundreds of people had just attended an Advent church service, where the Christmas candles would have been lit, and were on their way home.

None of them deserved to die.

While I was listening to the beautiful music at the assembly last Friday, I was looking at our Christmas tree and thinking about those shootings. The third floor of the department store would have been decked out with Christmas decorations and the foyer of the Church in Colorado most likely had a Christmas tree in the entrance foyer.

The Christmas tree is one of the most well-known symbols of Christmas. It is widely believed that the tradition of using a Christmas tree to represent Christmas time started with Queen Victoria of England who transported a large fir tree from Germany and placed it in Windsor Castle, her home on the outskirts of London. It soon became popular for families across England to buy a Christmas tree for their homes; to decorate the tree with tinsel, lights and small ornaments hanging from the branches; and to place all the Christmas presents beneath. At the very top of the tree is often placed a star or an angel.

The Christmas tree is also a symbol of hope. Each December, a large fir tree is placed on the lawn in front of the Capitol building in Washington D.C. In 2001 the tree was called the Christmas Tree of Hope, to express all our hopes for the new century. This year's

Christmas tree is 20 metres tall and covered in hundreds of lights. Those lights were switched on the evening before the Omaha shootings.

O Christmas Tree is a traditional German Carol. One of the verses from the carol reads:

> *O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree*
> *Your branches teach a lesson*
> *That constant faith and hope sublime*
> *Lend strength and comfort through all time.*
> *O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree*
> *Your branches teach a lesson.*

Christmas must always remain a time of hope for a better future in a better world.