

THE KNIFE ANGEL – 30th December 2019

Last Thursday we went to one of the must-see attractions in Liverpool at the moment. The statue of the Knife Angel which has been erected just beside the main entrance to our diocesan cathedral.

The statue itself is 27 feet tall and is made up of more than 100,000 knives, collected by police from knife banks all over the country, knives which were used in crime and confiscated by the police – or voluntarily handed in. The British Ironwork Centre – a family run business in Shropshire contacted the Home Office for permission to collect these knives from the police. The sculptor, Alfie Bradley, then created the angel to highlight the growing incidence of knife crime today. More than 900 serious crimes involving knives were recorded in Merseyside last year. So ‘Save a Life, Surrender Your Knife’ campaign and more knife banks were set-up.

And in the sculpture there is such an array of knives. Knives with multi-coloured handles make up the body, while the blades make up the feathers of the angel’s wings, with huge machete blades prominent at the tips.

The angel’s hands are outstretched showing sympathy to all victims of knife crime, while at the same time appealing to the perpetrators to stop and to understand and realise the huge suffering which they are inflicting.

It’s a very haunting yet impressive and moving piece of art, well worth a visit. Its positioning is also significant as the angel’s head is pointed towards the large crib scene just below it.

And there are two things at least that the angel seems to say:-

In the midst of a very often violent and hate-filled world, the angel points to Jesus who comes with a message of love and peace, of forgiveness and respect, and seems to be saying, ‘Look to Jesus and listen to him.’

The second thing the Knife Angel seems to say is, ‘Look, even God’s Son was born into a vicious and violent world.’

Last Friday was Holy Innocents’ Day, the day on which we remember how Herod, in irrational jealousy, had all the children in and around Bethlehem massacred because he thought Jesus might be a threat to his political dynasty.

The prominent machetes in the Angel’s wings remind us of the swords of the king’s soldiers.

And at various times in his life, Jesus was subject to violence. At one stage his enemies tried to throw him over a cliff, and ultimately there was his mistreatment at the hands of the authorities, both religious and secular, leading to his death on the cross.

Just like the victims of knife crime, Jesus was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”

Though the object of cruelty he refused the path of violence and retaliation.

In today’s Gospel, the shepherds responded to the message of the angels and went to Bethlehem to see the new-born Son of God.

The angels spoke first to rough shepherds, people who were on the lowest rung of society and shunned by most.

One would hope that the message of the Knife Angel would similarly reach those in society who perpetrate acts of violence, and call them to a better way.

All the knives in the sculpture were first blunted and sterilised, making objects powerful in a life-threatening way into something powerful in a way appealing for a change of heart and living. The sculpture seems to say, ‘There is a better way. There is a chance to change.’

We think of the centurion at the foot of the cross, that ultimate display of violence and degradation. As he heard Jesus words of forgiveness for those who crucified him, his heart was touched and he declared, “Surely he is the Son of God.”

And that’s the message of hope and re-birth offered in today’s epistle. Because of the birth of Jesus we are all offered redemption. No one is beyond the reach and appeal of God.

And that’s why the Knife Angel with its outstretched hands is so powerful.

It’s so appropriate that the sculpture has been erected outside a cathedral – a place pointing to God and his message of love and renewal. The knives actually used in criminal offences have been re-worked showing that a change of life is possible. Many have messages of hope engraved on them from families touched by knife crime. Liverpool Cathedral is the first step of the Knife Angel’s journey as it is hoped it will go to other cities with the message of hope that it displays.

It appropriate that the sculpture is being viewed at Christmas. The Angel points to the new born Christ child who came into a messy and broken world with a message of hope and love, a message of redemption and renewal that is as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago.

And as we prepare to begin a New Year let us accept this message of hope for each of us as we look forward. Not leaving the message of Christmas packed up with the decorations but let it live in our hearts and minds with a sense of expectation.