

Comment:

Dunblane

Dunblane, now unforgettably written into history as the small town where sixteen five-year-olds and their teacher were killed within three minutes by a wellknown local man, was best known as a popular base for oldfashioned summer holiday pursuits in the surrounding Perthshire hills. It is home to hundreds of commuters, seeking good schools and a peaceful life away from industrial sprawl.

The town has a significant place in Scottish Christian history. The lower storeys of the cathedral tower date from about 1100. The present building is the nave of the great church begun by the Dominican friar Clement soon after he was appointed bishop of Dunblane in 1234. A Master of the University of Oxford, Clement led the first Dominicans to settle in Scotland. In 1249 he became a member of the Council of Regents and was actively opposed to English attempts to secure control over the young king, not yet nine years old when he came to the throne. Clement's last recorded act was to excommunicate the pro-English party among the nobles in 1256.

The cathedral decayed after the Reformation but the nave was restored late in the nineteenth century and is now the principal Protestant place of worship in the town. In 1661 Robert Leighton became Bishop of Dunblane. (He was in the same class at the University of Edinburgh as Patrick Primrose, the Dominican who was denounced that year for his activities in Aberdeenshire.) Leighton did his best to maintain unity within the reformed Church of Scotland. He did not live to see the triumph of the Presbyterians in 1690, and the expulsion of the Episcopalians. The collection of books that he bequeathed to the clergy of the diocese may be visited at the Leighton Library in the middle of the town.

Houses in the cathedral precinct have been restored by the Ecumenical Council of Churches (as it was) and serve as a retreat and conference centre, particularly for all those involved in Action for Christians Together in Scotland (ACTS), the Council's successor.

No town has resources to cope with an attempt to kill every child in the infants class. But the cathedral is there. Amazingly, in this 'secular' society, hundreds of distraught and grief-stricken people found the cathedral the only place to go — perhaps, in Philip Larkin's words, because it is 'a serious house on serious earth'

In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,

And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

Perhaps it was easier to go to church because, on this occasion at least, there was little need for wild rage against God for allowing such an appalling deed. Human blindness and folly were only too obviously to blame. The killer was well known to a whole variety of people, many of whom knew that he was mad, that he had a sick interest in young boys, that he had grudges against society, and that he was licensed to keep guns at home — two pistols, two revolvers and two rifles. The newspapers had no difficulty in putting together his story: illegitimate, deserted by his father, brought up by grandparents thinking that his mother was his sister, and so on. A 'weirdo', as one youngster said. The subject of suspicion by parents and the police for over twenty years, though nothing could ever be proved. That such a man could run sports clubs for young boys, though they kept being closed down, and, for all his weirdness, could have permission to have guns, now seems, with only a little hindsight, beyond belief.

Of course no one could have predicted, or even imagined, that he had it in him to do such an appalling thing. But a fair number of people must be wishing that they, or anyway *someone*, had paid more attention to the kind of person that Thomas Hamilton was becoming. No individual or institution can be blamed, though the mother who complained about him years ago will never believe that there was nothing the police could have done. Clearly, there need to be laws to ensure that a person's mental stability is verified before a gun license is granted. Guns are always available, illegally, of course — though this man was evidently a stickler for the proprieties. He seems never to have photographed boys *completely* naked. He badly wanted authority to be on his side. On his way to the school he stopped to post a number of letters, to various authority figures, including the Queen. The more we know about him, the plainer it becomes that he had the motivation and the capacity to do something 'senseless' — which does not mean that he had to do something *that* dreadful.

According to the 'free-will defence', as philosophers call St Augustine's explanation of why God allows dreadful things to happen, we are created such that the greater good of our having a free choice between good and evil means that even God cannot stop us from bringing evil about. Theodicy is often implausible and sometimes even offensive. There are many evils that understandably incline people to rage against God for the way the world is. But *some* 'senseless' deeds turn out to have antecedents which might have been recognized, and *some* perpetrators of wickedness have histories which might have alerted people to danger. The weeping for the dead at Dunblane surely includes tears of sorrow for the blindness and folly of a whole society.

F.K.