

I am sure we were all shocked by the footage of last Tuesday's terrifying blast that rocked Beirut, and could be heard as far away as Cyprus. Although at first it was feared to be a terrorist attack, it seems that this explosion was accidental and its cause was the storage of thousands of tons of Ammonium Nitrate, which is used as a fertiliser but is also - given the right conditions - highly explosive. It appears that this substance was stored for six years until a fire brought about those right conditions causing a devastating explosion.

The scenes of the aftermath are distressing to say the least. Now that the clear up is continuing the scale of this tragedy is apparent: 220 confirmed dead, with dozens still missing, many of them foreign workers. Thousands injured, causing the local health services to be overwhelmed. Hundreds of thousands made homeless. Now the local people are taking to the streets to protest at the government, which is accused of corruption on a vast scale, mismanaging the economy, and failing in its duty to protect its citizens. If that wasn't bad enough, the Covid-19 pandemic is another huge problem facing Lebanon. It's clear that the scale of this tragedy requires a global response.

Alongside this international effort, has been a Lebanese army. Not *the* Lebanese army. Here we would expect the military to be swiftly deployed alongside the emergency services to provide aid and support. Not in Beirut. No, this army is of ordinary people armed with nothing more than brooms, dustpans, brushes with hard hats for helmets, clearing the streets of broken glass and rubble and doing their very best to help the countless victims whose homes and livelihoods have been destroyed. The gap left by the failure of the authorities is being filled by people who have been moved to do whatever they can to help their neighbours in need. Out of the darkness of tragedy light still shines.

I imagine some of the refugees and asylum seekers who are being picked up in the English Channel, will have passed through the port of Beirut. Rather than simply thinking of the best way to keep these people away from our shores by deploying the Royal Navy to push them back to France (was that really considered as a serious option?!) or pay the French authorities to deal with the problem in their territory, maybe the time has come to look at the root causes of this huge refugee crisis. Maybe this is the opportunity not just to repair broken buildings and physical infrastructure in the blasted city of Beirut, but to deal with the reasons people take such desperate measures to seek a better future. And the root causes are not hard to spot; I have mentioned them already. The root of so much human misery is the lust for power. Once those who have power wield it in order to feather their own nests or to maintain that power at all costs, rather than looking after the interests of those they have the privilege of governing, those people will be robbed of their future. If the international community acts together then there may be yet hope for Beirut, hope for Lebanon and so many other places where that lust for power wreaks havoc and devastates lives.

In 1887 Lord Acton wrote to Bishop Creighton a letter containing a quote that is often misquoted: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely". The letter is worth reading in full and you can read it here: <https://oll.libertyfund.org/quotes/214>

God, we believe, has absolute power, yet he is incorrupt and incorruptible. Why? Because his power is the power of love and is supremely shown to the world by God himself hanging on a cross.

God, above all, offers us a future hope, and perhaps we can turn this verse into a prayer for the people of Beirut, Lebanon, and all who live under a yoke of powerful oppressors:

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

*Jeremiah 29.11*

And something to bring a smile to your Monday:

Faith is like Wi-Fi; it is invisible but has the power to connect you to what you need!

With my love and prayers

Simon