

Back in 1859, a young Swiss man, Henri Dunant, was traveling in Northern Italy. In the course of his travels he passed through the city of Solferino. It was the day after a major battle between the armies of Austria and France. He came upon the field of battle - thousands lay dead and injured - there was no one to care for the wounded, who lay scattered across the field of battle. Dunant and friends organised an ad. hoc field hospital to tend for the wounded of both sides.

The desolation of the battle field was an image that stayed with Dunant when he returned to his native Geneva. Over the next three years he wrote a book outlining his experiences and proposing the foundation of an international body, made up of volunteers, who would *look* after the wounded in time of war. In 1863, the International Red Cross was formed. Since then its members have brought help to the wounded, the prisoners of war, the bereaved in conflicts large and small around the world.

All this grew out of one man's experiences on the battlefield of Solferino. Many people no doubt looked at the same scene; some hardened by war; others probably as horrified as Dunant but saw it as part of the grim reality of war and moved on. Dunant saw the same scene and saw what could *be* gone and so was born a movement that has brought light and hope into situations of *darkness* and despair.

Solferino must have been an awful sight. Our *Old* Testament lesson spoke of another battlefield, the valley of dry bones as told to us by Ezekiel. It must have seemed a God forsaken place in the fullest sense of that word. A place where God seemed to be absent.

In our Gospel passage we read of the death and raising of Lazarus. The tomb of Lazarus must have seemed a desolate place, a place marked by absence. As their brother lay dying, the family had sent for Jesus - he did not come. He was

not there when they came to bury him. As I say it seemed to be a place of absence - "Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died.

Of course Calvary was a desolate place - it too seemed to be a place of absence. As the darkness descended, the cry went up from the lips of the dying Jesus, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' It seemed a God forsaken spot. But the battlefield and the tomb of Lazarus are both transformed as God breaks through. Places of death and despair are transformed into symbols of life and hope.

I would suspect that many of us can recall situations in our own life when darkness seemed to envelope us. It may be the death or serious illness of someone we love; maybe we were badly let down by someone close to us. What brought us through that? The odds are someone came to us, was there for us. Someone brought light and hope into our darkness. through that person, God broke through.

In the mean time, the darkness can be a lonely place, where our faith and trust in God can be tested or even broken. As I have recalled before, I remember as a student being among a group meeting with Archbishop Michael Ramsey, shortly after he had retired as Archbishop of Canterbury. We asked him he ever had doubts. We meant doubts about his vocation to ministry. He went much deeper and spoke to us of doubt at a much deeper level. He was quite candid and said 'Oh yes - on those occasions I take myself to the foot of the cross and it is there that I rebuild my faith'

At the foot of the cross I discover that God in Christ knows all about darkness, all about despair, all about rejection. This is the same God who raised Jesus triumphant. on the third day. I discover that there is no situation in life, no anxiety, no disappointment that is beyond the redeeming love of Christ.

Gong back to our Old Testament :Lesson, set as it is in the context of the devastation of the battle field, it is worth noting that God uses an individual, Ezekiel, as his instrument of restoration and. renewal: when he tells him to prophesy to tile dry bones that lay scattered across the valley. This is what brought to my mind the story of the origins of the Red Cross in the experiences of Henri Durant on the battlefield of Solferino. Durant allowed himself to be an instrument of hope and healing in a situation of total despair for tile injured lying untended on the battlefield.

'This brings home to me the important truth that we, as members of the Church, are called to be not only recipients of grace but also channels of grace. One of the criticisms leveled against our Church in certain quarters is that we preach a social gospel - to which I general ly say 'Yes, guilty as charged and proud of it. We preach not *only* Gospel but also the social consequences of the Gospel, the implications in daily living of laying claim to the Good News of our Lord Jesus Christ - to work out in the business of daily living what we mean when we pray "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

As we draw closer to Holy Week, When we make a particular remembrance of tile death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ as we take ourselves in heart and mind to the foot of tile Cross and watch with him, let us seek God's help to enable us to not only reach a deeper understanding of what that means for each one of us, but also a deeper understanding of how we may be more effective instruments and channels of his love in the world in which we live.