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GOOD MORNING

Tomorrow we mark the 20th Anniversary of the bombing in Omagh –a street crowded with Saturday afternoon shoppers. 29 people died – including a woman pregnant with twins. Hundreds were injured. And more will have been scarred emotionally.

I was still living in Northern Ireland. I remember where I was. It was one of those moments. Nobody was ever convicted or held responsible – although blame was laid at the door of a group called the Real IRA. It happened just four months after the signing of the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement which for the first time offered the Northern Ireland community hope of better times. It was a cruel blow which threatened to remove hopes so recently raised.

Twenty years on, I ask myself about where these dreadful moments lead. Can this terrible level of suffering ever become a source of spiritual energy and hope? Nelson Mandela emerged after 26 years of imprisonment not as an angry and partisan figure but as a leader who shaped a new nation.

I read what the victims said – speaking with great dignity of what they had lost. Michael Gallagher, whose son Aidan was killed, pleaded for a new kind of society. But the politicians seem to have neither the will nor the skill to reinvigorate the now dormant Belfast Agreement.

I served in ministry in Northern Ireland for 29 years. My experience tells me that the task of shaping a new society there is certainly about new politics. But real healing is also needed – healing of painful memories which so easily lead to what we used to call ‘whataboutery’ where each side always has an accusation to throw at the other. And there is the task of dismantling the sectarianism which the Corrymeela Community of reconciliation has called ‘belonging gone bad’. We need generosity, forgiveness, love – and maybe only then politics.