

**Buncefield Anniversary Service Sunday 10 December 2006
by The Rt Revd Christopher Herbert, Lord Bishop of St Albans**

We all have our memories. Mine is of being woken suddenly and terrifyingly by the huge explosion; the whole house shaking. Like everyone else I didn't know what had caused it. Within minutes someone was at my door telling me that it might have been a terrorist attack. The next memory is of seeing thick, black smoke pouring up into and across the sky.

I have other memories – of coming to the meeting at the Sports Centre in Hemel and seeing the look of shock and devastation on the faces of those made homeless – and watching the Police and Council Officers as they swung into action so efficiently – some of them homeless themselves; and then going to a school in Leverstock Green and seeing all the windows shattered and tiny shards of glass embedded in absolutely everything like shrapnel....and being taken to meet the fire crews and being asked what took me so long because the minute I stepped into Silver Control, the fire damped

down....and then going around the Industrial Estate, and being unable to comprehend the scale of the devastation; buildings twisted into grotesque shapes; trees stripped and blackened. It would be invidious to pick out heroes – though the fire crews are up there with the gold medallists and, I can't begin to tell you how proud I was of the clergy and people of the Church in Hemel, as so much pastoral and practical help was offered. It was understated, often un-noticed – but it was the stuff of which real communities are made. I should like to put on record my personal thanks and profound appreciation for all that was done by Dave Middlebrook, Simon Cutmore, Peter Cotton, Sue Allen, Jan Neale, David Lawson and fellow ministers in other churches.....the Salvation Army (the Mars bars in their van near Silver Control were delicious).

Of course Government Ministers came shooting up the M1 and shot back down again....but the real work was done at County level, at Borough level, and at parish and street level. It is not recognised, it is unsung – but it has its own tenacious, quiet and noble bravery.

What the fire crews did as they walked towards the inferno, was echoed a thousand times over by smaller but equally important acts of sheer loving heroism, all over Hemel Hempstead, on the day itself and in the weeks which followed.

None of this, of course, detracts from the questions that continue to be asked – about the causes of the blast; about the storage tanks being so close to places of work and homes; and about who was responsible. Those questions will not and must not go away. I confess I remain puzzled why a public enquiry was not held. There should be nothing to be afraid of in transparency should there?

A sermon needs a biblical text – and mine comes from the story of the prophet Elijah, who longs to meet and see God. He stands on a mountain: “a great strong wind came, rending mountains and shattering rocks before him, but the Lord was not in the wind, and after the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the

earthquake, and after the earthquake, fire, but the Lord was not in the fire – and after the fire, a still, small voice....”

There have been many attempts to listen to the still, small voice after the devastation here – all those acts of worship, in the car park at Maylands Avenue Industrial Estate, in the school at Adeyfield; all those quiet, one-to-one conversation where people have helped each other through the shock; the counselling, the friendships, the Mayor’s remarkable and very timely appeal; the work of repair and rebuilding: the still, small voice of God is heard and found in all of those things – wherever, out of love and self-sacrifice people give themselves to each other.

But I want to suggest that there is also a still, small voice to be encountered in some of the bigger questions which the Buncefield explosion highlighted.

Let me concentrate on one in particular:

In the past few years Hertfordshire has suffered more major incidents than any other county in Great Britain. The Watford rail-crash; the Hatfield rail-crash; the Potters Bar rail-crash and Buncefield. In each of those cases the work of the emergency services, the work of the churches, the work of voluntary organisations, and the work of hospitals, the work of Borough and County Council Officers has been outstanding. The County of Hertfordshire has a remarkable record – and can be proud of how these major incidents have been handled. Hooray and alleluia for that.

But can someone please explain, therefore, why those services upon which we all rely, I'm thinking particularly of the NHS and our hospitals, are now facing such upheaval and such turmoil? The A & E at Hemel Hempstead is apparently scheduled for closure; the QEII at Welwyn Garden City is under threat and we are told that the NHS is being taken closer to the people. That is a twist in truth and logic worthy of '1984'.

When, from a statistical point of view Hertfordshire is such a vulnerable place to live (because we are the neck of the funnel from the North and Midlands into the London). Is that being factored in to the “reorganisation” of our health-care systems?

Is that being factored in to the resourcing of our emergency services?

Is that being factored in to the siting and development of new housing areas?

I do not know the answers to the questions – but it is only right to raise them.

Would it not be helpful if, as we reflect on Buncefield, Potters Bar, Hatfield and Watford – would it not be helpful if County-wide we could bring together the leaders of emergency services, hospital trusts and PCTs, churches, voluntary organisations, councils and

transport planers and see what we can jointly learn from all that has happened?

And the still, small voice would require that Ministers, who have a very difficult job in balancing priorities (I fully acknowledge that), if they and their senior advisers might come to listen to what is being said.

The still, small voice is in danger of increasing the volume – and that must be avoided, but I want to add two things more.

- and that is firstly to acknowledge and give thanks for the ingenuity, the efficiency the professionalism and the wealth created by the industries in Hemel Hempstead and especially on the Maylands Avenue Industrial Estate, which enables so much of our society, in spite of all the criticism we hear, to flourish.

and secondly, to recognise that whilst competition seems to be an inherent and necessary part of industry and society, what we also discovered out of Buncefield, was the significance and pleasure that came from co-operation: co-operation across the boundaries of professional and volunteer, of industry and social services, of councils and churches.

At a local level it would be very telling and very forward-thinking if those kinds of co-operation for the common weal of all the people of Hemel Hempstead, could be explored and developed further.

Put in this way: imagine a child in Hemel Hempstead in, say, twenty years time. What would you like that child to be able to say about living in this corner of Hertfordshire, which they cannot say now?

If Buncefield could lead us to shape our community and our work and our lives so that we could bring that kind of vision into being –

then the still, small voice of God will be able to be heard.

Meanwhile, in those who are still suffering ill-health, homelessness or distress as a result of the explosion, the still, small voice of God discovered within the depths of our souls and within the love of others, will bring healing.

But for those in positions of power, in the worlds of insurance and law, in the boardrooms of public companies, the still, small voice is waiting to be heard; quietly and persistently demanding righteous and just dealings for those who suffer, and demanding that the eternal values of compassion and truth are given space to flourish.

‘After the fire, the still, small voice....’.