



Pastor's Page

Judging by Compassion

On Sunday 18 December 1988 I drove past a small Scottish town just off the A74(M) as I travelled from Aberdeen to Carlisle on an Evangelistic Christmas tour. The little town in the Dumfries and Galloway region meant nothing to me and so as I passed it, it barely even registered in my head. However, just four days later its name became indelibly printed on my mind as a Pan Am jet crashed killing all 259 people on board and 11 others on the ground. The crash was the result of a terrorist bomb and the name of the town of course was Lockerbie.

That name has been in the news again these past couple of weeks as the Scottish justice secretary, Kenny MacAskill decided to approve the release of Abdelbaset Ali al-Megrahi (the Libyan man imprisoned for the crime) on compassionate grounds. He is suffering from terminal cancer and only has a few months left to live and so has been released in order to be with his family in Libya. He received something akin to a hero's welcome when he arrived back in Tripoli last week leading to further criticism of the move by those opposed to his release.

This matter raises issues that lie right at the heart of our Christian faith, issues that revolve around justice and compassion. It is on the grounds of compassion that Mr Megrahi has been released. The bible is full of references to God's compassion –James 5:11 says; "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy" The Old Testament says; "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23) Time and again the gospel writers tell us that Jesus had compassion on people resulting in either a healing miracle or some other act of grace. Jesus himself declared that he had been sent "to proclaim freedom for the prisoners" (Luke 4:18) He also taught "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:44) He told the story of the Good Samaritan which underlined this truth and even when he was being crucified he cried out "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34) His very death for sinful mankind was surely the greatest demonstration of compassion ever.

But what about justice? Isaiah 61:8 tell us that God loves justice and therefore we should love justice too. But has the cause of justice been served by releasing Mr Megrahi? Is it fair that this man can spend his final days in the company of his loved ones whilst hundreds of families still grieve for lost loved ones due to his actions? Well we can be sure that God shares the pain of the families of the Lockerbie tragedy and loves those people dearly – but he also loves Abdelbaset Ali al-Megrahi! Yes God is a God of justice and he is also full of compassion. And as we struggle to understand how both can co-exist and be equally important to God we need to look again at the cross of Jesus where 'wrath and mercy meet'. Where God both judges sin and forgives the sinner. It is here that hope lies for al-Mergrahi for the 'Lockerbie disaster' families and for the whole world.

Let's pray that this controversial decision leads those most damaged by events in 1988 to the God of all compassion whose "peace and perfect justice kissed a guilty world in love"

30th August 2009