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# Peace to be Omagh's memorial

Monday, 11 August 2008

Even at the remove of a decade, the immensity of the Omagh bombing is staggering. Thirty-one lives brutally destroyed and hundreds more damaged beyond repair in one gruesome afternoon, at a time when Northern Ireland was beginning to show a tentative understanding that peace was finally at hand.

At the tail-end of our nasty little conflict came its most vicious blow. There is almost a Biblical irony in the idea that the death throes of the Troubles produced

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more death, on a devastating scale.



Which is one reason why the tenth anniversary of the massacre is so important. It is both a measure of how far we have come since that time and an ugly reminder of how fragile our assumptions about peace, about reconciliation, even about an afternoon's shopping can be. The common remark at funerals is so often repeated because there is wisdom in it: "You never know the day or the hour".

The ceremony that will take place in Omagh on Friday at three o'clock — the same date and time the bomb exploded ten years ago — is the uneasy crossroad where public commemoration meets private grief. The families of some victims have already indicated they will not attend; some because they disagree with the memorial, others no doubt because they do not wish to put their own feelings on display.

It's unfortunate that the memory of Omagh can leave such a divided situation, but some events have so much wider significance that they do require public acknowledgement. It would be worse if the anniversary was left unmarked.

The facts of Omagh are as simple as they are ter

rible: a stolen Vauxhall Cavalier, with explosives packed in the boot, was parked in the town's busiest shopping street on Saturday, August 15th.

After three inadequate telephone warnings by the Real IRA bombers, it exploded with people still thronged about it.

Thirty-one died, including unborn twins, hundreds were injured and hundreds more were bereft. It was an attack on everyone: Protestants, Catholics, the old, the very young, Omagh-born and Spanish tourists were among the dead.

The context of the attack was also shocking, be

cause the bombing came less than four months after the Belfast Agreement and the hope it brought for an end to such events. Hesitantly, Northern Ireland was beginning to feel like a relaxed place.

The terrible scale of Omagh is the main reason why it will receive wider recognition this week than many other anniversaries, but that does not diminish them. Friday is the 35th anniversary for Edward Drummond, a barrow boy killed by a UVF bomb not much smaller than the Omagh device. It is the 34th anniversary of Joseph McGuinness, a 13-year-old shot by the UDA on his way to get chips. It is the 17th of Ronnie Finlay, a former UDA man shot repeatedly by the IRA in front of his children. The grief of those they left behind is no less.

The lesson of Omagh is that one or 31 is too many and too painful. As Ian Paisley said of the grieving of Omagh ten years ago, "all their tears are the same". Omagh was the most terrible mark left by the Troubles — we know well that it was not the only one. They should remind us to ensure we leave no more.

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