



Mrs Annie Harkness

(Cookstown)

**“Forgive whatever grievances
you may have against one
another. Forgive as the Lord
forgave you.”**

Talks to the Rev Isaac Thompson

TWO AND ALMOST THREE, IN THE TROUBLES

I well remember Tuesday morning, June 6th 1978 at 6.15... it was the first full day of the General Assembly. My husband, Cyril, went to go to his work as usual, he was then a company Sergeant Major in the UDR, and I heard the explosion. Four of my six children were with me in the house, they were screeching upstairs. I knew Cyril's lorry had been blown up; the windows of our home were blown in. When I went out to the scene, expecting to see the worst I heard him say to me, "*Quick, get me a piece of binder twine*". He had the presence of mind to know that he needed a tourniquet.

A neighbour was quickly on the scene, an ambulance was called and my Cyril was admitted to the Mid Ulster Hospital in Magherafelt. There they discovered two fractures to his spine, minor fractures of the leg... in all sixteen days in hospital, and eight months off work... and all that time at home he sat with a loaded gun. Many the time on a dark winter's night when he was out on duty, I would hear people around our country house. I just prayed that they would go away. He would keep saying to me that I was going to crack up, but I knew in the midst of a difficult situation the wonderful peace of the Lord, and this became a time of recommitment of my life to Jesus Christ. Cyril remained in the UDR until 1986, but he had and still has a very painful leg.

My dear late mother was a Christian. When I was just over one year old, my dad died at the early age of twenty-six.

From her I learned about Jesus, and as I gave my life to Him little did I realize just how much I would need Him in my life in this difficult world. My brother died at the early age of forty-nine, and my mother at just sixty-two.

After Cyril's incident, my daughter Doreen was transferred from the RUC in Belfast to Magherafelt. On Friday evening 25th July 1981 she left to go on night duty and that was the last I saw of her. A few hours later, at 12.55 am she was on a check point between Magherafelt and Moneymore, when she was killed. A car, with two young men in it, crashed into her at 110mph. Doreen was just 22 years of age. My world just seemed to fall apart. I refused tranquillisers and I prayed long, and just leaned on the Lord. I thanked the Lord that I still had four girls and one boy. I visited her grave often, and that seemed to help me. You try to get back to normal, you have to live on, and with the Lord's strength, that's what I did.

Five years later in 1986, my daughter Heather who owns a restaurant, was held up by three masked gunmen. Thankfully she was not harmed, but I can honestly say that I knew that extra grace from the Lord as I helped and supported her to get over the incident.

Then in 1988 my '*baby*', my only boy, David, announced that he was emigrating to Australia. That was hard, but I could not stand in his way. He went off on 16th October 1988, but he was back on 24th March 1991 to see me. I had been taken into hospital and had major surgery. I developed pneumonia, and medical experts advised that the family should be near me. I recovered, however, and all thanks to the skill of doctors and the wonderful

working of the Lord in healing. David decided not to return to Australia and he started to work for Karl Construction. During 1991 I was in and out of hospital for check-ups. One day David said to me, "*Mum, my firm is doing work for the security forces*". I replied, "*you might as well sign your own death warrant*". But he stayed on in his job; I would leave him out to meet the work van on the main road about 7.20am and he was usually back at 6.10 pm (5.10 in the winter evenings).

On Wednesday, 15th January, 1991 Cyril and I were due to fly to London to see my brother Stanley whom I had not seen for eight years. At 41 years of age he had a serious road accident which left him an invalid. I left plenty of food in the house for David so that he would not have to go out unnecessarily. On the previous Monday there had been a high threat on construction workers for the forces. David did not go to work that day. We flew off on Wednesday. He took my car on Thursday, left it at the main road and got the van to Omagh as usual.

On Friday evening Stanley came to me and said he had heard on the news that there had been a bomb near Cookstown. I looked at the clock, and at once I said, "*that's our David!*" We immediately got on the telephone to our minister, the Rev Ivor Smith in Orritor Manse. Nobody seemed to know anything. But I knew within myself that David was dead. At the last minute we got a flight home, they even held the aircraft for us at Heathrow. At Aldergrove there was a doctor, nurse and police there to meet us, but I would take no tablets. My '*baby*' was dead, blown up at Teebane along with his workmates, but I knew in the midst of an aching heart, that the Lord was with me.

My mother always taught me to treat people the way you yourself want to be treated. David was buried on 20th January, and I thought to myself, *“that’s two of my children gone now; two less to pray for”*. My minister and his family were and still are a wonderful support and help. £186 was missing from David’s pocket and that made me sad when I realised that someone had stolen it from his body. Thankfully his signet ring was not taken and I still wear it on a chain on my neck. I gave him a New Testament when he was going to Australia, and I was thrilled to see that he had that book in his tool box daily as he travelled to and from Omagh, and I know he got strength from reading it.

I sat my four adult daughters down after David’s death and I told them not to let any bitterness enter their hearts. I can honestly say I had no bitterness, and that’s how I was able to cope. I cry many a night, even to the present time. It’s hard to go to the grave knowing that two of them are lying there now. I rub shoulders with suspected terrorists every week. One of them said to me one day, *“you’re a marvellous woman”*. I knew it was his guilty conscience speaking; I get annoyed, but then the Lord comes and whispers that I must forget the past and build for the future.

I remember Doreen asking me one night to lend her my gold cross necklace. I told her that a gold cross would not protect her, but to ask Jesus into her life and He would help. I remember praying, *“Lord, you know Doreen, if you desire to take any of them, I’ll be willing”*. But it is hard to give them up. And you know, I wish the killers no harm;

God reigns in my life, and I long to see him reign in their lives one day.

There will be no peace in our land while people hang on to bitter memories of the past. There will be no peace even when the guns are silent, but people are still being robbed and having their limbs broken. In the midst of all my heart ache and pain I have to talk about the goodness of the Lord. I could never tell you all the ways in which He has blessed me. I trusted Him as my Saviour as a girl of 20 years; I failed my medical for nursing. Many the time in my life I have grown cold in my relationship with Him, but He has never left me. Deep down in my heart I knew God was with me and he never let me go.

I went to visit the relatives of the victims of the Greysteel massacre. I visit other victims from various wars. The relatives of the Teebane victims meet regularly. I am deeply involved in Orritor Presbyterian Church. I now have nine grandchildren, and I try to show them the way of Christ. Yes, I often wonder why there have been so many shattered lives in our Province; yes I wonder why neighbour is so evil against neighbour. Yes, I have known much hurt, but the Lord has given me a peace that I cannot explain... but one day we shall be told the reason for it all. And to you who read this account, I say with one of old, *“get rid of all bitterness... be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you”* (Ephesians 4:31-32), and one day we shall understand the reason why.

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