

The Power of the Gospel in a Turbulent World

I was seventeen years old and trying to balance work with night school and other personal commitments. As I sat in the church service early one Sunday morning I listened with growing interest to accounts of plans being made to organise a Christian outreach to the Summer Olympic Games (the XXth Olympiad, dubbed the Games of Peace”) in Munich, Germany. Here was a unique opportunity to get together with Christians from all over the world and meet at the Olympiad to share the Good News about Jesus with participants, spectators and organisers. The whole world would be there.

I had little money to speak of, but was quietly confident that, if God wanted me to participate, He would provide over and above my limited resources. Friends had talked to me about living by faith, trusting God to provide, but I had never needed to do so; it would be a new experience. If I stepped out by faith, would God really come through with the finances? As this was my first overseas trip, was I up to sharing my faith with a lot of people I had never met?

Seven weeks later, tickets paid for, I looked out of the window of the Boeing 707 into the early morning mist surrounding Munich International Airport and felt the excitement of being where I knew God wanted me to be. Later that day, as one and a half thousand of us converged on a mediaeval castle in the little town of Hurlach, I was staggered at the diversity of the participants. Baptists, Pentecostals, Catholics, Methodists, you name it; some denominations I had never heard of. Dutch, Egyptians, Israelis, South Africans, Australians, Finns, even indigenous Americans. They came from almost every nation on earth, spoke many languages, dressed distinctly and ate different food. Some were very young, others past retirement. It seemed age made no difference in this endeavour.

All of us were bound by a sense that God had called us to Munich for a purpose that was bigger than any of us, as individuals. We believed that, like Esther in the Old Testament, He had called us together "for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14).

After a brief period of training and inspired messages by Brother Andrew ("God's Smuggler"), Corrie Tem Boom, Youth With A Mission founder Loren Cunningham and lesser known men and women of God we were armed and ready to go out into the streets.

Triumph and tragedy

The event that stands out most vividly in my mind as I reflect on that brief moment in all of our lives was not the amazing unity between Christians of every persuasion at Hurlach (as powerful as that was), or the opportunity to witness about Christ. Nor was it the beauty of the German countryside and the electric anticipation of the Games (the largest yet, with 195 events and 7,173 athletes from 121 nations; the main stadium was constructed in site of grassy hills made of debris from the Second World War). These all paled into insignificance compared to what was about to happen. What I will always remember was something more poignant, the historical turning point that challenged the complacency and festive spirit of the Olympics and captured the attention of the entire world, when an act of terrorism exploded on the stage.

Early in the morning on 5 September 1972, five Arab terrorists wearing track sweat suits evaded elaborate security and climbed over the fence surrounding the Olympic Village. Just before 5 am, they knocked on the door of Israeli wrestling coach Moshe Weinberg. Weinberg opened the door and was instantly killed by the terrorists, who then proceeded to round up nine Israelis as hostages. Later that morning they announced to the world that they were Palestinians, members of a PLO faction known as the Black September Organisation. They demanded that Israel release 200 Arab prisoners and that they be given safe passage out of Germany.

After tense negotiations, the terrorists agreed to be taken by helicopter to the NATO air base at Firstenfeldbruck. From there they would be flown to Cairo with their hostages. However, something went terribly wrong. A fire fight ensued and eleven hostages, all five terrorists and a German policeman were killed. Footage shown on international media over the next few days showed scenes of frightened hostages and hooded terrorists in the Olympic Village and the fiery end that consumed their conflicting dreams and ambitions.

A period of mourning was declared at the Olympic Games. The remains of the slain athletes were flown to Israel. However, the massacre was not considered sufficiently serious to merit cancelling or postponing the Olympics and, after a pause of thirty-four hours, the International Olympic Committee ordered the games to go on.

But the change that we all felt in the city was palpable. Instead of the festivities, bright lights, music and optimism that had previously prevailed, there was an air of fear, failure and pessimism. Stunned residents and tourists asked the same questions. "How was this allowed to happen? Why us?" were cries heard through the city. Instead of stalls selling hot dogs and beer and bright banners proclaiming the games, tanks stood on the street corners and surly German soldiers with machine guns surveyed the passing crowds.

The following day, back at Hurlach Castle, hundreds of Christians gathered together and prayed that God would show us how to respond. Our leaders were confident that the right door would be opened and that, collectively, we were strategically placed to respond to a great tragedy in a Christian way. But what could we possibly do?

I will never forget how Loren Cunningham came to the platform and told us that the Mayor of Munich had asked churches and Christian organisations present in the city to organise a march for peace. It would be officially and financially sponsored by the city. We would be provided a police escort. In a time of crises, the civic authorities that had, until then, been cool towards Christian outreach, asked those same organisations to be at the forefront of attempts to bring about reconciliation and healing.

Healing in the Christian message

The next afternoon, more than three thousand Christians on every shape and size, marched quietly through the streets in the centre of the city. The main roads were closed to traffic. Some bystanders were nonplussed; others wept. Something was happening. The Mayor's office provided flowers and paid for banners proclaiming the message of love. All of the media were there.

Several hours later, as the sun set over the Olympic Village, thousands of candles were lit and the hillside formed a sombre backdrop for a simple service of worship and prayer; the light was visible for miles around. Athletes and spectators came to watch, observing the simple but powerful expression of Christ's love as a counterpoint to the fear, hate and death that the hostage drama and the official response to the kidnapping had engendered. Many of us were invited back to the Olympic Village, where we shared the Gospel with athletes, trainers and team managers. Journalists and television crews took a new level of interest in Christian meetings (many of them spontaneous) now being organised in the Marienplatz and other public squares in the centre of the city.

I met a young German man who claimed he had admired Hitler but was so shocked by events that, for the first time, he wanted someone to explain Christianity to him. People approached us in the streets and coffee shops, in the English Garden (where tourists usually went to drink and take drugs) and underground railway stations, wanting to talk, to listen. The ambivalence had disappeared. For several days, it seemed that the Holy Spirit was opening hearts in the city and giving a level of access that had not previously existed. People who had not previously been interested in the Bible spontaneously approached us asking for answers. A friend wrote a book about the times, entitled "To Munich with Love".

The power of God's love

There is no power greater than God's love. In a world divided by racial, religious, economic and political problems, there is no force that can transform the human heart like that of the Holy Spirit. I have participated in numerous international conferences (and helped plan some), visited the United Nations building in New York, listened to resolutions intended to bring about lasting change, some of which have been effective, the majority not so. There are simply too many agendas and conflicting power interests. As long as we continue to rely on the same human resources, applied the same way, to fix the same problems, we will end up with the same results. Munich taught me that, if the Gospel is real, it is the only durable answer for our world. Not religion, not denominations, not dogma, not man's wisdom, but the power of God.

One woman's faith

On my last evening in Hurlach, as I walked to dinner, I noticed a frail old lady going in the same direction. Instantly recognising her, I took her arm and we walked, side by side, and reflected on about the impact of the Olympics tragedy and the bitterness that had driven the terrorists. She talked about her early life in Holland.

"My family was taken prisoner by people such as these", she told me, "but with God's help we learned to forgive them". How could people who had lost family members and friends forgive their oppressors? We had seen the hate and fear in peoples' eyes. To some, talk of forgiveness seemed futile. Surely that was going beyond the limit. After all, we tell ourselves, we are "only human".

This lady knew differently, from personal experience. During the Second World War she and her sister Betsie were sent to Ravensbruck concentration camp after they were caught hiding Jews who were being persecuted by the Nazis in Holland. Betsie died in the camp. Their parents and other family members and friends perished through the misery of the war or in concentration camps.

The story of this family was the subject of a movie by Worldwide Pictures, called "The Hiding Place". Hate and love were set side by side. Humanistic religion and Christian faith were seen for what they truly represented. Faith triumphed, but at enormous personal cost that only Father God could calculate. For the survivors, the hardest act of all was finding room in their hearts to forgive those who had ruined them.

I listened in awe to the story told, the proof that "God is love" and that the Gospel has real power in a turbulent world. Only the grace of Jesus enabled this old lady, Corrie ten Boom, to forgive her persecutors. Corrie told me that, on the darkest nights, her hiding place was God; without Him she would have given up hope and would never have been able to forgive her tormenters.

As she told me her story, and related it to the rest of the group the following morning, we were encouraged to rise above the hurt, pain and frustration that we had experienced, and to allow the love of God to give us power to go on. That is the kind of difference Jesus Christ makes in peoples' lives. That is what makes the Bible and its message relevant in a global society riven by ongoing hatred and violence. Miracles do happen!

Now there is a second movie, Stephen Spielberg's "Munich". This version is about "getting even" by eliminating every person involved in the Munich massacre. The script appeals to many, because vengeance is a normal human response. Our first reaction is often to strike back, to "hit them where it hurts". As human beings, we lack the strength to exercise grace and forgiveness. This is where the Gospel, and the need and power to change come into play. Only the strength of Christ within can equip us to rise above the melee of a turbulent world and live His way.