



The careless side of evil

The fire in the Grenfell Tower is probably the worst single tragedy in London of my lifetime. The London Bridge terror attacks two weeks ago were awful, as was the Westminster attack before it, but—purely in terms of fatalities—they were less devastating in terms of the loss of life that we are still finding out about in the Grenfell tower.

What differentiates them is that whereas the terrorists set out to cause the loss of life, nobody intended that anybody should die in the Grenfell tower. And yet it has turned into a worse loss of life than anything we have yet experienced.

The fact that nobody intended that anything like this should happen does not, however, mean that no one is responsible. There has been a massive misjudgement in design if a fire from a faulty fridge in someone's kitchen can somehow rip across an entire tower block in under an hour.

We don't know this for certain yet, but let us say, for the sake of argument, that the fault lay in the cladding that was recently put onto the outside of the building. It may even have been put on to the building for good reasons, like keeping in the heat and general insulation, but it did not factor in how it would help a fire to spread.

Now let us imagine you were on the committee that approved the cladding. You are in a meeting: it's gone an hour: you don't know that much about architecture anyway, and the design gets passed through on

the nod.

At the time, it hardly seemed significant: just a minor part of that particular day. Now, months or years later, you realise that it was the most important decision of your life and you screwed it up.

Is it possible that you had a chance to query this design? The chances that there would ever be any consequences from something so minor as a decision about cladding were surely minute, and yet that is what happened.

These judgements are not easy in some ways. Three years ago, we were told by the builders, mid-repair to the spire at St Mark's church, that we needed to pay a further £25,000 because there was a risk that some of the stonework would fall off the spire at some point in the next two decades.

I and the rest of the relevant committee paused. It was a lot of money and after all, even if the stonework fell off, the chances that someone would be walking underneath at the time were miniscule. But then, there was still a chance... The bottom line is, we paid the money, and did the extra repairs on the stonework. We didn't want to take the risk.

With terrorists, the evil they do is an evil of intention; with the Grenfell Tower, it is an evil of carelessness. It may be allied with the temptation to save money; it may be allied to a genuine miscalculation of risk. It is subtle; however, it may still be evil.

June 2017. Thought for the Train is a short column written by the Reverend Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train, or elsewhere. www.surbitonchurch.org.uk. You can find this online at <http://surbitonchurch.org.uk/category/thought-for-the-train/>