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Saturday, 16 August 2008

One rain drenched wall in Omagh's memorial garden yesterday evoked the terrible aftermath of a decade ago, when the town began counting its dead.

"That evening," the inscription on it says, "a great silence descended on the town."

A heavy stillness returned to the

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What are these?



Floodlights illuminate the Omagh Memorial Garden last night following a silent tribute to the victims earlier in the day to mark the 10th anniversary of the bombing

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streets of Omagh



yesterday at ten past three, exactly 10 years after the car bomb attack that devastated the town and became synonymous with it.

At that moment, shortly after the anniversary memorial service began, a moment of silent remembrance stilled the hundreds of people gathered by the garden in Drumragh Avenue and straggled in two lines along Market Street, where the bomb exploded.

Heavy rain fell on a crowd that was as varied as the one struck down in 1998. There were shopgirls and men in suits, lads in football tops, old women and toddlers who shook the crash barriers, no more aware of what was happening around them than little Breda Devine or Maura Monaghan would have understood the bomb alert moments before they were killed. Couples held hands.

And it was as incomprehensible yesterday as it was a decade ago — that someone would want to come to a place like this and kill indiscriminately.

Heavy, heavy rain fell on the town yesterday, but from about 2.30pm on, shops along Market Street began to close and people clasping umbrellas began streaming down to the garden by the River Strule.

Hundreds came, although perhaps less than expected. They stood to one side of a temporary stage that was edged in black cloth, while the dignitaries — including Taoiseach Brian Cowen, Secretary of State Shaun Woodward, Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness and Junior Minister Jeffrey Donaldson — sat in rows of seats at the front.

There followed a service of solemnity but not great emotion, or perhaps stifled emotion. As the rain fell, the Omagh Waterford Peace Choir sang and messages were read out from Omagh, Buncrana — where the Southern visitors who died had come from — and Spain, the home of two of the dead.

Terry Waite, the former Beirut hostage, gave the address and referred obliquely to the frustration that many of the families of the victims feel because the killers are still at large.

“No one — I repeat, no one — who has experienced deep suffering will underestimate the power it has,” he said.

“It can blind individuals to reason. It can cause them to cry out for revenge. It can tear communities apart.

“How can it be managed? Some would say that justice is the answer, and indeed we should always seek for justice.

“However, we know that in a flawed and broken world, complete justice is hardly ever experienced. We do not live in a world where we can experience absolute justice.

“With justice as with so many other things in life, we frequently have to settle for something less than the absolute.”

John Hewitt's poem, *Neither an Elegy nor a Manifesto*, was read out by Ronnie Moran. Its first and final line, “Bear in mind these dead” was repeated from Market Street. John McLaughlin, father of 12-year-old Sean from Buncrana, read it in Irish, Anna Abad Ramos, sister of Racio, read it in Spanish, and Caroline Martin, the sister of Esther Gibson, said it again in English.

The Duchess of Abercorn then read out the names of the dead, including Avril Monaghan's unborn twin girls, Evelyn and Eimear. It took over two minutes to say them all aloud.

Then there were more songs and prayers, and more rain. The heavy clouds obscured what was supposed to be the climax of the ceremony. Children scattered flower petals in Market Street and walked to the memorial garden while a paper played a lament.

There, at the same time a glass obelisk was unveiled at the site of the bomb in Market Street, moving mirrors were switched on. They are designed to reflect sunlight onto the monument, but there was no sunlight to be had.

The weather provided its own terrible echo of 10 years ago, however. As the crowds moved back past the bomb site at the close of the ceremony, the colour ran from the petals and washed into the rainwater. Exactly 10 years after it happened before, Market Street ran red again.

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