



PICTURE OF HOPE: The 16 mothers widowed in the September 11 attacks and their 17 babies who were born in the aftermath

New life springs from the ashes

IT was the most uniquely affecting, year-defining Yuletide image. The human phoenix arising from those sad and shattered ashes of Ground Zero.

That piercingly poignant, cheek-drenching picture of 16 proudly defiant mothers posing with their 17 babies. Women, pregnant on September 11, who had lost their husbands. Children who will never see their fathers. TS Eliot's words resonate: "I had not thought death had undone so many."

Yet the indefatigable loving smiles on these mothers' faces shine out with an extraordinary gift of hope. Unequivocally, challengingly so.

This life-enhancing message of hope, of irrepressible optimism contesting the seemingly impenetrable

darkness was further taken up last week by the splendid Fergal Keane, the BBC's foreign correspondent, in his inspiring trilogy of Radio 4 talks, *Towards A Newer World*. Magnificent stuff.

The received orthodoxy of impending Armageddon in an unavoidable clash of civilisations is flawed thinking, the hard-bitten Keane persuasively argues, in that mellifluous languid lilt of County Cork.

History can be rewritten, our one duty to it, as Wilde attested.

Collision

And how right he is. We needn't lodge forever in our separatist ideological dugouts. Bridges can be built.

The projected collision between the economically advanced and democratic West and an obscurantist theory of fundamentalist Islam is not inevitable. It's nonsense. It need

not happen. Sure, we've all been unhelped by the fearful aftermath of September 11.

Sure, it's all too easy to be overwhelmed by doomsday predictions exacerbated by the terrible swift sword of punitive bombing retaliation, and those horrific images of innocent civilians being punished for crimes they didn't commit.

Sure, it's all too easy to be convinced that we've witnessed an event as transformationally life-changing as Pearl Harbor or Hiroshima, and that we're all now living on a war footing ad infinitum.

But pause and check the reality. It says otherwise.

The Muslim world isn't united in a terror campaign against the West.

Nor is there a widely held Muslim belief in that narcissistic cruelty which reckons that a man's route to paradise is via the flailing suicidal fury of grubby martyrdom. Recent

history, too, provides fertile grounds for genuine, tangible optimism.

Since that vast graveyard of Rwandan genocide, since that Bosnian slaughterhouse, there's compelling evidence that mass horror has woken us up.

Public opinion on a global scale has rallied behind the campaigners for human justice, and a steady succession of war criminals has been brought to account.

The community of conscience – Keane's own marvellous phrase – is alive and fighting.

Rousing

The Queen's Christmas Day message, focusing on hope through community, was also well received.

It has strident echoes of those rousing words of Minnie Louise Haskins, as spoken by King George VI in his 1939 Christmas broadcast: "I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied: 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than any known way.' So I went forth, and finding the hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of the day in the lone East." Utterly uplifting. Be inspired.

Alistair Cooke, 92, continues, meanwhile, to purvey his own inveterate brand of idiosyncratic optimism: "Forget about the golf swing. You're above ground, and mobile. Glory be," A very happy New Year, everyone.

Rudy, a hero for our time of terror

THE citation is unequivocal: "For having more faith in us than we had in ourselves, for being brave when required and rude when appropriate, and tender without being trite, for not sleeping and not quitting and not shrinking from all the pain around him, Rudy Giuliani, Mayor of the World [sic], is Time Magazine's 2001 Person of the Year."

Some eulogy. On the morning of September 11, Rudy was a spent pugilist, cancer survivor, embittered object of pity and vilified hypocrite – just

another burnt-out political lame duck, his marriage in flames, career in ruins, hirpling into irrelevant oblivion.

Cometh the hour, cometh the mayor. Carpe diem in overdrive. Crisis manager extraordinaire. Improviser supreme. Unstinting selfless purveyor of tenderness and offscreen kindness. Creator of the necessary illusion that good was bound to prevail. Neo-Churchillian achiever of mission impossible.

Some comeback, Rudy. Awesome.