

13th July 2022

When?

**"Of all possible answers to the general question, 'When?',
the simplest is the answer, 'Now!'"**

William Rowan Hamilton, *Lectures on Quaternions* (1843)

Among the plethora of protest songs of the 1960s Folk Music scene, one has always stood out for me – *Where have all the flowers gone?* by the legendary Pete Seeger. Inspired by the traditional Cossack folk song *Koloda-Duda*, Seeger borrowed a traditional Irish Melody and published the first three verses of the song in 1955. Joe Hickerson added more verses in 1960, and the song quickly became a "standard" in the Folk scene – including being sung by this writer as a 1960s student. In 2010, the *New Statesman* listed it as one of the top 20 political songs of all time.

Mourning the passing of flowers, young people and soldiers – who go ultimately to their death – its final verse asks:

And where have all the graveyards gone, long time passing?

Where have all the graveyards gone, long time ago?

Where have all the graveyards gone?

Gone to flowers, every one!

When will they ever learn, oh when will they ever learn?

The words of the last line of each verse are on my mind today: *When will they ever learn?* These words came back to me when I read a message from the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the Rt Revd Dr Iain Greenshields, on 11th July this year, the 27th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre. The website, "Remembering Srebrenica", which he references (<https://srebrenica>), and which recalls the Bosnian genocide, has a tagline: "Paying tribute to the victims of genocide, sending a clear message to future generations to say, 'Never again!'"

So today, I add my voice to those of Dr Greenshields, the organisers of "Remembering Srebrenica", Pete Seeger, and all those who pray and work for justice and peace. I ask: "When will they ever learn?" I pray with William Rowan Hamilton that the answer will be "Now!" And I ask the same question of myself. So, I'll finish this by reliving my 1960s student-protesting days, as I sing again: *Where have all the flowers gone?*

A prayer for today

*Lord, let "When?" be answered with a resounding "Now!",
as justice and peace prevail. Amen*