

As I looked at the news coverage this week - those awful images of fully laden passenger jets slamming into the World Trade Centre Towers in New York, those almost surreal images of the wreckage afterwards - and tried to make some sort of sense of it all, I was conscious of a blackness, a silence, out of which nothing seemed to be coming. For these events went far beyond anything I had seen, experienced or heard of. Was there anything I could say on Sunday that could relate this to my faith in the God and Father of my Lord Jesus Christ. I must confess the blackness, the silence, continued for much of the week.

The Jewish people speak of silence - they talk of the great silence that hung over the nation in the years that followed the Shoah, the Holocaust of the last war, when a third of European Jewry went up in flames - a silence in which God seemed not to speak. It was almost as if the questions were too painful to ask.

This week we witnessed what will stand as one of the great acts of barbarity. We have looked into the darkness of what man is capable of - I am faced with that appalling question - In a world capable of such barbarity in which someone could plan and execute such a scheme, where does my faith fit in? Of course we also saw moments of incredible bravery, rescue workers racing upstairs as others evacuated the towers - lights of goodness in the midst of the darkness.

One image that has stayed with me was of an interview with an elderly man, queuing up to donate blood, talking at first in quite emotional terms. Then his face hardened and he spoke of this day being like Pearl Harbour. As at that time, he went on, there would be no compromise. Finally, "We must make sure this never, ever, happens

again." At that point I sensed the raw pain and the raw anger. That interview crystallised for me thoughts that had been going through my own mind. This is an event that will traumatise American society for many years to come. American society will have to express its pain and to know that its pain has been heard by the rest of the world.

As I thought of that elderly man, I thought of the words of Psalm 137. This psalm opens with the words; "By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept." We would use this opening section occasionally in Church. The closing three verses, however, we put brackets around as not being suitable for use in public worship. The last two verses run like this; "O daughter of Babylon, thou shalt be wasted with misery: yea happy shall he be that rewardeth thee, as thou hast served us. Blessed shall he be that taketh thy children and throweth them against the stones." I can't imagine those words sung to an Anglican chant - I can imagine them spat out and eyes of steel.

I recall listening to a tape on this particular psalm. Our tendency is not to read that bit. The speaker said we had to listen to the whole psalm - because in this closing section you get a rare insight into the pain that lead up to the Exile - the pain of watching the city burn, the Temple crumble, the invading army slaughter the women and children.

One of the glories of the Old Testament tradition - and the psalms in particular - is that even this raw emotion can be brought before God, that this pain is heard by God - and there begins the process of healing. The American people, in the awful months that lie ahead, as the true scale of what has happened sinks in; will need to know that their pain is heard, that their anger is heard and, yes, even their cries for vengeance are heard. Now is not the time for pointing to what may be

seen as errors of foreign policy in the past. People who are hurting do not need to be told of their faults, they need love, they need healing, they need care.

Clearly over the next few weeks we are going to see a military response to what happened last week. The desire to retaliate in the wake of what has happened is understandable. Few would argue that such evil can go unpunished.

We all know what can happen when anger is roused. In the heat of the moment things are said or done that in calmer moments we might regret. People have killed in moments of anger - only to live with the consequences of guilt and remorse.

When the anger that is roused is a national anger, this has consequences not just for individuals but for whole nations - quite literally the difference between peace and war. Over the years theologians have struggled with this one - under what conditions and in what circumstances can a Christian engage in war? In the process there has evolved the concept of the "Just War". The generally accepted criteria are as follows.

- 1) The amount of force used must not be more than is strictly necessary.
- 2) The evils which the war creates must not be greater than the evils it is designed to correct.
- 3) The force used must be discriminatory and must not be aimed at innocent persons who are not combatants or directly engaged in the war effort.
- 4) The war should be defensive in character

5) War should be aimed at the re-establishment of right relationships as soon as possible.

Reading over these over the last couple of days, I find myself seeing these as a mechanism to help us, even in our anger, to be true to ourselves.

For if, even in our righteous anger, we abandon our basic Christian standards of morality, we become no better than those who attack us. And in the process, even if we exterminate them, they emerge as the victors. If in the coming weeks awesome force is used against civilian populations, do we not become more like them.

At this time in her history, America needs people who will be with them in their pain, their hurt, their anger. Her leaders need true friends who, listening to their pain and their anger, will also seek to enable them, as they plan and execute whatever response is made in the coming days, to remain true to fundamental values of righteousness and truth.

God bless America  
Guard her people,  
Guide her leaders,  
Grant her peace.

1042

1048

1126