

In the late night news programmes on Monday night word started to come through of an explosion in Manchester. We awoke on Tuesday to learn the full horror of what had happened. Young people, children and teenagers and their parents coming out of a concert in Manchester City Centre attacked by a suicide bomber, an attack subsequently claimed as its own by so-called Islamic State. This attack, deliberately targeting young people, is singularly barbaric even by the standards of recent times.

Of course there is the fundamental question of ‘Where is God in all this?’ What can faith say in the face of teenagers lying dead and injured after a concert? What can faith say to a parent or partner or child of someone lying in a morgue or fighting for their life in a intensive care? There can be no room for platitudes, it must be all part of his plan, all these things happen for a purpose. You cannot say such acts are motivated by religion; such acts should not be dignified with any religious or cultural label. What happened in Manchester was evil and needs to be named as such. To say that God allows these things, to say that God wills these things is nothing short of blasphemy. So where is God, where is faith in all of this?

For me I begin with a fundamental truth; God is not the instrument of evil but is present with those who are facing evil. This is the God who in Christ calls out to the Father, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ – who promised his disciples, ‘I am with you always – to the very end of the age.’ We are not alone - God travels the road with us, strengthening us, comforting us, encouraging us, listening to our pain, our anger, our distress – this is the God who encounters us in the Psalms, listening to the hurt and pain of his people.

Fintan O’Toole wrote a very thought provoking piece in the Irish Times last Wednesday, finishing with the words, ‘killing is easy, living decently in the face of it is hard.’ That sums up our problem. The people who plot these acts of horror want to intimidate, want to divide, want us to let go of our basic standards that mark us out as a society, our openness, our inclusiveness, our tolerance of difference.

The people of Manchester have shown in many ways over these last few days their refusal to be intimidated, that they are going to remain true to themselves. One of the loveliest signs of this for me was the picture of two neighbours, one a Muslim man in traditional dress, the other a Jewish lady, walking arm in arm to the vigil in Albert Square. In an action that spoke louder than words, they declared ‘You are not going to divide us.’

A huge responsibility rests on political leaders at a time such as this. Leaders need to be leaders in ensuring that voices that would argue for intolerance, both religious and racial do not hold sway. They have an obligation to protect society. There is a righteous anger at what has happened and those responsible must be brought to justice. But justice will not be served by intolerance and racism. Earlier on in his article Fintan O’Toole wrote;

‘We need political and religious discourse that, while conceding nothing to this viciousness, refuses to demonise or alienate those communities. We need governments that are not goaded by atrocity into abandoning democracy, human rights and the values of an open society.’

If we were to fail in this crucial test, then these people will have won. As a commentator argued during the week, the people who carry out these attacks are actually motivated by a fundamental hatred of our society and our values.

This is where the Gospel has something very particular to say. As I heard that discussion, I thought back on words of Dr Martin Luther King, himself the victim of intolerance, of hatred long before he was assassinated. In a series of sermons preached at the height of the Civil Rights Campaign in America entitled ‘Strength to Love’ he declared:

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

Words such as this are sometimes derided as hollow idealism with no place in the real world. In the real world that was Northern Ireland in the Troubles, hate responding to hate only brought a cycle of tit for tat killings in which innocents on both sides died and positions were entrenched. It was light, shining out of the darkness of violence and pain, such as we saw in the response of Gordon Wilson to the death of his daughter in the Enniskillen bombing, that brought forth initiatives of reconciliation and healing. The Gospel, with its injunctions to reconciliation, to justice has much to say in this broken and hurting world. Even the apparent weakness of our Lord’s injunction to turn the other cheek; To turn the other cheek is not an act of weakness – rather an act of defiance in the face of evil – To turn the other cheek is not to run away but rather to stand your ground on your own terms.

That is what we saw in Manchester this week. In gathering in the centre of Manchester, in Muslim and Jew walking together arm in arm, there was a message – you may strike us but you are not going to be intimidated us – you may strike us but we are not going to hide in our homes – you may strike us but you will not change who we are.

May the healing presence of the crucified and risen Christ be with the people of Manchester in these coming days.