

In a world that seems to have become hardened to violence and tragedy, the murder of Fr Jacques Hamel as he said Mass in the Parish Church of St Etienne on Tuesday struck a particular note of horror. It was an act in the name of a twisted ideology that flies in the face of all mainstream religious values, be they Christian, Jewish or Islamic. This is an event that strikes at the very heart of our humanity, which challenges the very core of what it means to be Christian, our allegiance to Christ and his teaching. In the context of the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, our own President Higgins wrote the following

*To those on the road it is reported that
The Prophets are weeping,
At the abuse
Of their words,
Scattered to sow an evil seed.
Rumour has it that,
The Prophets are weeping,
At their texts distorted,
The death and destruction,
Imposed in their name.*

MDH 2014

In our reading this morning from the letter to the Colossians, writing to a Church living in a hostile world, Paul very clearly states the challenge that is before us:

. ⁸But now you must get rid of all such things – anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. ⁹Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰and have clothed yourselves with the new self, *Col 3:8-10a*

This is not a way of weakness, this is a path of radical strength that the world does not always understand. In the aftermath of the killing of Father Jaques, Archbishop Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury tweeted

‘Evil attacks the weakest, denies truth and love, is defeated through Jesus Christ.’

The brevity of the tweet takes us to the very heart of the Gospel, to the death and resurrection of Jesus. In that death and resurrection, celebrated in our service of Holy Communion, we learn that death and darkness do not have the ultimate power, life and light will ultimately triumph.

Or are we just whistling in the dark? As I thought through this during the week, my mind went back 11 years, to the senseless death of Brother Roger of Taize, killed during evening service in the Church at Taize. We were there in the days following the death as we made our way to Taize for the funeral. During that week the brothers showed a remarkable witness in the face of what for them was a devastating tragedy. The life of the community continued, visitors were welcomed, the bible studies and services continued and on the day of the funeral, in addition to being lead in prayer for the person who had killed Brother Roger, we sang the following hymn

Lord Jesus Christ,
your light shines within us.
Let not my doubts and my darkness speak to me.
Lord Jesus Christ,
your light shines within us.
Let my heart always welcome your love.

Let not my doubts and my darkness speak to me. Memories of that day and the words of that hymn, give a particular force to those words of Paul to the Church at Rome:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath,
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Rom 12:17-21

This goes beyond a blind defiance in the face of evil. It is rather a proclamation of the positive power of love. This is what is manifested in the

Cross. Writing in the Guardian the day after the death of Fr Jacques, Giles Fraser, himself a former priest, wrote this:

No, Jesus absorbs the violence that comes from us not from God. He receives our blows, our punishments, our disdain. And, despite his innocence – or, rather, precisely because of it – he refuses to answer back in kind. No more an eye for an eye. In other words, the sacrifice of the cross is the non-violent absorption of human violence. The offer of love in return for hate, even to the point of death. This is the horrendous price that peace is sometimes asked to pay. This is what makes the eucharist life-giving and not some historical death cult.

There is a power to an offering of the other cheek; there is a power to going the second mile; there is a power to ‘Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.’

Of course all this is happening in a context, in the context of the violence in Iraq and Syria, the twisted ideology of ISIS and the flow of refugees that have followed. As we reflected in the aftermath of the attacks in Paris before Christmas, it would be tempting to say that Europe should take no more refugees. But do we just abandon them to their fate? Surely that would be to allow the brutality and inhumanity of others to diminish our own Christian understanding of humanity and justice – in a very real sense, if we do that then the extremists have won. For there is no peaceable alternative to a society where people of all faiths are valued and free to worship without fear, but these events show that this is something which can never be taken for granted. Now more than ever we must resist the language of fear and reprisal, and speak aloud the values of tolerance and love which unite the vast majority of our global family.

The objective of the men of violence is to drive those of good will apart. Let us not give them that victory; let us remain true to who we are, followers of

Christ, of him who turned the other cheek, who went the second mile, who rose triumphant over death itself.

In the words we sang at Brother Roger's funeral,

Lord Jesus Christ,
your light shines within us.
Let not my doubts and my darkness speak to me.

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Let my heart always welcome your love.