

Last Friday night as people were settling down to watch the ‘Late Late’ or whatever else we were doing at that time, horrendous events were unfolding on the streets of Paris. I would suspect that this is going to be one of those events, like the death of John F Kennedy, the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York, when we will remember what we were doing that night. Oblivious to what was going on, I was at a Trinity dinner in Belfast, meeting up with old friends I had not seen for years, listening as Senator David Norris regaled us with his wonderful wit – only in the morning, as I checked my phone for news bulletins, did I begin to grasp the sheer horror of what had happened. As with you, I’m sure, a whole range of thoughts, questions, confusions swirled about in my mind.

First of all there is the fundamental question of ‘Where is God in all this?’ What can faith say in the face of bodies piled up in a Paris theatre? 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 unit in Paris this morning? There can be no room for platitudes, it must be all part of his plan, all these things happen for a purpose. What happened in Paris 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?

As I often do on occasions such as this, I found myself turning to the writing of Dr Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the Great Britain and the Commonwealth. In an essay he wrote ‘On God and Auschwitz’, he asks this fundamental question:

‘But where was God? That he was present seemed a blasphemy; that he was absent, even more so. How could he have been there, punishing the righteous and the children for their sins, their own or someone else’s? But how could he NOT have been there, when, from the valley of the shadow of death, they called out to him?’

For me I begin to build my thoughts out of that apparent contradiction. God not the instrument of evil but present with those who are facing evil. 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.

Of course faith has been distorted to justify awful deeds such as we saw in Paris on Friday night. At the end of last year our President wrote a poem, ‘The Prophets are weeping’ that has been inspired by events we have seen in Iraq and Syria, the rise of the evil fundamentalism that is ISIS, the trail of misery of refugees fleeing war and persecution. Speaking to a group of young people, before reading this poem, he spoke of “incredible threats from those who abuse sacred texts”.

The Prophets are Weeping

*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.
The sun burns down,
On the children who are crying,
On the long journeys repeated,
Their questions not answered.
Mothers and Fathers hide their faces,
Unable to explain,
Why they must endlessly,
No end in sight,
Move for shelter,*

*for food, for safety, for hope.
The Prophets are weeping,
For the words that have been stolen,
From texts that once offered,
To reveal in ancient times,
A shared space,
Of love and care,
Above all for the stranger. M.D.H. 2014*

The President of France, in speaking to the nation on Friday night, promised the French people that those who directed and organised the attacks would be vigorously pursued. He is quite right – evil must be opposed and dealt with. But how is that to be done? One of the troubling features of last Friday's events is the passport that was found of one of the attackers. It was a Syrian passport and it would appear that the holder was registered as a refugee in Greece. 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.

One of the key issues that must be addressed in this whole process is how do we engage with and support moderate voices within Islam as they seek to stand up to extremists within their own community. Let us not forget that many of those fleeing the Middle East are members of the Islamic community who have fallen foul of ISIS, whose relatives and community members have been murdered and who have fled for their lives.

We live in difficult and dangerous times. On this day we pray for the city of Paris, for the people of France as they come to terms with the horrific events of last Friday; for those who have been scarred in body, mind and soul, for those who mourn, for those who are tempted to turn to hate and thoughts of revenge

against innocent people. We pray for leaders of governments as they seek to resolve the long standing issues that have divided the Middle East, that have fuelled the emergence of extremist groups such as ISIS. We pray for those responsible for security, for protection of our citizens. We pray that God may stand alongside those who, across divisions of culture, of race, of creed, work for peace, for reconciliation, for justice in our world.

This is not God's will – these are the actions of evil and distorted minds. God is with us in the pain, in the questioning, in the anger and the hurt. In his presence, may we find something of his peace.

I will just close with part of President Higgin's poem:

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