St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 25th October 2020

It was deeply touching to watch on television the huge crowds that gathered across France over the course of last weekend, a dramatic show of national unity after the decapitation of the schoolteacher, Samuel Paty, a father of a five-year-old boy, in an affluent suburb of Paris.

This attack had happened after he had shown controversial cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed to some of his pupils in a lesson on freedom of speech. The history and geography teacher had advised Moslem students to leave the room if they thought they might be offended, and he had become the target of death threats since the lesson took place and a "fatwa" was issued against him..

The attacker, an 18 year old, whose family is from Russia's Moslem majority Chechnya region, had lived in France for 12 years. France's Moslem community, which is Europe's largest, comprises about 10% of the population, and they have often stated that they are frequent targets of racism and discrimination because of their faith, an issue that has long caused tension in the country.

The French President, Emmanuel Macron, said that this incident was "a typical Islamist terrorist attack" and that "Mr Paty was killed for teaching children freedom of speech."

Evil had been stalking the streets of Paris, not for the first time, and no wonder the civilised world is still reeling from what happened – such barbaric slaughter that brings back to mind several Islamist attacks in France in recent years. You will recall the 12 people who were shot dead in the offices of the satirical newspaper, Charlie Hebdo, and the 90 who were killed at a concert inside the Bataclan;  and the 87 who died on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice on Bastille Day the following year. That is just the tip of the iceberg.

Like many of you, I have been to Paris. My first time was when I spent a month as a student when I studied at the Sorbonne one summer, and over the years I have been back to savour the delights of its magnificent architecture and its atmosphere which is very special indeed.

I love France, of course. I stayed for a year, teaching English in a French School, down in Provence as part of my studies at Glasgow University. I love the food, the wine, the people, the culture.

And I am still shocked at what happened that has so rocked not only Paris but the whole of the French population.

Our support, our prayers are directed to all who have been affected by this horror perpetrated amongst them.

There are many people who are blaming religion for what happened in Paris last week or at the concert in the Manchester Arena or on the London Underground in 2005 or on London Bridge last year.

Well, let me quite emphatic here – terrorism has no religion.

Those young men from ISIS or the Caliphate or whatever they like to call themselves are not true Moslems.

This is not a religious war between Christians and Moslems or Moslems and Jews, but it is a complete distortion of true religion. It is fundamentalism at its worst, with all the attendant dangers it brings in its wake.

What that young man carried out was just pure evil under the guise of religion.

This is not the age of the Crusades, if you remember your history, with the Christian armies marching against Islam.

Christians and Moslems, all human beings created in the image and likeness of God, and each of their deaths is a blasphemy.

You and I are living in very dangerous times, and if we buy into the narrative that this is religious war, then we will continue to perpetuate the culture of death and mutual destruction.

And it isn't easy to deal with.

Violence comes naturally to us all.

But violence is never the answer.

It only spirals and spirals.

Dr Martin Luther King, who was assassinated by a sniper's bullet puts it so well, "Violence, instead of diminishing evil, multiplies it…through violence, you may murder the hater, but you do not murder the hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate…returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

As a Christian, I should never be comfortable with hatred. If the Church is to be a force for good in the world, all those who are Christian must overcome our base instinct for vengeance and retribution.

Someone has to stop the madness, as those who try to follow Christ, who is called the Prince of Peace, cannot shirk our responsibility.

We need to widen our circle of care and compassion. We must seek to build bridges and forge understanding and get rid of suspicion and strive for justice.

We need to stand up and say that those who die on the streets of Beirut and Baghdad, Paris and New York and London and Manchester matter every bit as much whatever their faith or ethnicity.

Men and women of goodwill in every faith community must do something to reverse this spiral of death and destruction.

Christians, Moslems, Jews, men and women of faith, and those with no faith at all, must affirm our common humanity and recognise in all our fellow human beings people of infinite value and worth, and work to rid the world of the evil that has so little regard for the sacredness of life.


The Rev Fraser R Aitken

Locum Minister.