

Don't look backing Anger

On the last day, at the resurrection, Salman Abedi will stand before almighty God and answer for his actions in Manchester last Monday night. He will not be alone. We will all stand before Almighty God. We will all answer for our actions.

I guess that Salman Abedi answer something like this:

The suffering I inflicted was necessary in order to fight an even greater evil – the western destruction wreaked upon Syria, Iraq and especially my home country, Libya.

In other words he will argue that one evil justifies another.

And there will be a long line of people putting the same argument: Tony Blair about the war in Iraq; Lyndon Baines Johnson about the napalm bombing of children in Vietnam; Harry S Truman about the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; Arthur 'Bomber' Harris about the saturation bombing of Dresden. And we have to be clear in our own minds about whether the bombing in Manchester really is different from all the others. Or whether the only difference is that in the Manchester bombing we were the target whereas in the others we were doing the targeting.

I put it to you that in the eyes of Almighty God Salman Abedi may not look very different from all those other bombers. Each of them will answer for his own personal decision. But there is a human tendency to attribute blame wider than to the individual. That, of course, is why Salman Abedi exploded his bomb. He did not believe for a moment that that children and teenagers were personally responsible for the bombing of Syria and Iraq and Libya. He believed that they were responsible because they were British. They shared the blame because they shared a nationality.

And the Christian tradition agrees to a point but says that Salman Abedi did not go far enough: it is not the British nation which shares in the responsibility for bombing Libya – it is the whole human race.

This is the meaning of the story of Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve disobeyed God and because they are the ancestors of the whole human race then every single one of us is implicated in that disobedience. In that sense we are no different from Salman Abedi.

This is very important because in the weeks that follow there will a tendency for some people to widen the blame beyond Abedi personally but to stop before they include the whole human race. They will widen it only as far as Muslims. And as Christians we need to be very clear that this is utterly wrong. We all share in Salman Abedi's sin.

This is, of course, exactly what the life and death of Jesus is all about. When God looked down from heaven he saw a whole human race which had made a mess of its world. He saw a whole human race which deserved judgment. And he could have condemned us all, as a race. But he chose not to. He chose to die in our place. And in choosing to suffer rather than take revenge he set us all an example of how to behave. Over the Easter season we have been hearing from St Peter's first letter written to those preparing for baptism. This is how he put it to them in words we heard three weeks ago:

Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example,
so that you should follow in his steps.
He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.
When he was abused, he did not return abuse;
when he suffered, he did not threaten;
but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

1 Peter 2:22-24

Over the next few weeks we may well hear people blaming Muslims for the violence that is among us. It is important that we contradict them. It is important because it is untrue. Either people individually are to blame or the whole human race is to blame.

It is also important to contradict them because to apportion blame to one part of the community is divisive. It sets one group of people against

another and prompts retaliation. One evil is used to justify another – and another and another.

Our role as Christians is to empathize our common humanity, both in our own sinfulness and in the love of God.

But the terrorists do not want to emphasize our common humanity. They want to divide us. What the terrorists want to create is what terrorists have always wanted to create –fear. They want us to fear them and to fear Muslims, Asians –in fact anyone will do. WE need to be clear as Christians that we simply do not do f fear. Jesus knew before his death that his disciples would be gripped by fear once had had died –and even after his resurrection once he had left them at the ascension. John’s gospel records Jesus’ teachings, his encouragement to the disciples to let go of their fear. Perhaps his teaching can be summed up in the words we heard two weeks ago

Do let your hearts be troubled
Believe in God, believe also in me.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.
I do not give to you as the world gives.
Do not let your hearts be troubled,
and do not let them be afraid.

John 14:1 and 27

But they did. And it is John himself who tells us how, after the resurrection:

On the evening of that first day of the week,
the disciples were together,
with the doors locked for fear

John 20:19

John also recalls Jesus’s response:

Jesus came and stood among them and said,

“Peace be with you!”

...

As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”
And with that he breathed on them and said,
“Receive the Holy Spirit.

John 20:21-22

It is the gift of the Holy Spirit which counteracts their fear because amongst the many gifts which the Spirit gives Paul tells us that the greatest is love (1 Cor 13:13) and John himself tells us that perfect love casts out all fear. (1 John 4:18)

But having breathed on them and given them the Spirit Jesus then gives them an awesome responsibility:

If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven;
if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.

John 20:23

In the context of last week’s events these words make perfect sense. When sins are forgiven there is reconciliation, there is an end to tensions, there is peace. Where sins remain unforgiven there remains tension, disintegration, war. The violence in Manchester took place because some Muslims are unable to forgive what western nations have done in Libya, Syria, Iraq. And if we do not forgive what took place in Manchester then there will be further violence.

The people of Manchester seemed to have sensed that. On Ascension Day a crowd gathered in St Ann’s Square for a vigil and a time of silence. At the end they broke into an Oasis song, Don’t Look Back In Anger. If ever the Holy Spirit has spoken through the people that was it.

Don’t look back in anger.
Perfect love casts out fear.

N Clews
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