

**28<sup>th</sup> May 2017**

## **EXODUS 32.1-14**

The UK is reeling from a terrorist attack on a pop concert which has so far claimed at least 22 lives and left around 60 injured, many of them children. After the shock and grief and respect for the victims, comes the reckoning and the interpretation of what happened.

The suicide bombing bears the hallmarks of the sort of jihadist attack that groups such as Islamic state and al Qaeda have been specifically urging their followers to undertake. Such jihadist groups have three principal targets in the West: the security services, churches or Christian institutions and anything they perceive to be part of a morally 'corrupt' western society. This tragically includes even pop concerts, as we saw with the Bataclan attack in Paris 18 months ago and we see now with this horrific attack on young people in Manchester.

Attacks in the West generate vastly more news coverage than similar atrocities elsewhere and, if we are honest, as individuals we feel them much more deeply too. That is not wrong. It is a biblical principle that our first responsibility is to those we are in closest relationship to (1 Timothy 5:8) and it is natural that our emotions should similarly feel their pain even more.

However, we must not forget that similar attacks are almost routinely happening in other parts of the world. This month alone, so far 12 suicide bombers have either carried out attacks or attempted to do so in Northern Nigeria's Borno State while two more have targeted the neighbouring region of northern Cameroon. Just over a week ago, Boko Haram released a video warning Christians in the region that they would face further suicide bombings if they did not convert to Islam. A few days after the Manchester Attack Coptic Christians were slaughtered in Egypt by Jihadists.

The Manchester attack of course happened during the UK's general election campaign and the main political parties immediately suspended campaigning as a mark of respect. However, the timing also raises deeper issues about our own resilience and moral resources to face down such attacks.

Since the attack Manchester, and indeed the rest of the UK, has been coming together in displays of solidarity and unity. There have been many touching stories of generosity and kindness in Manchester, homeless people coming to the assistance of distressed people, people donating free lifts, food, blood and help to victims and the emergency services.

Many have turned to prayer, even if they are not religious. People have reached out for hope and help. Some wonder 'Do we as a nation have the moral resources and resilience

to continue to stand up to it and defend our values?’ Do we even know clearly what those values are?

In a lecture given at Cambridge University just six months before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, TS Eliot warned that simply talking about ‘democracy’ would not be enough to defeat Nazi ideology, because democracy could too easily become a vehicle to bring in things that undermine our values. We must also know what our historic national values are and defend them: values such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of the press, one law applying equally to all people and, of course, parliamentary democracy.<sup>1</sup>

Our hearts go out to all who have been affected by this unspeakable act. But we must be alert and be thoughtful and prayerful as to how we respond. Because it seems to be another religiously motivated attack – those of us of faith will be criticised once more for belief systems that can cause hatred and fear. Muslims particularly are feeling the backlash, and already are being targeted with a new wave of Islamophobia. The fact that the bomber came from parents who were refugees has also highlighted the issue of who we let into our country.

The Bible reading we have today to end our brief look at the Book of Exodus from the Old Testament, does not help. Moses has gone up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments from God. When he comes down he finds the Israelites have made an idol, a Golden Calf, and are

now worshipping it instead of God. God’s response is to blow them all away.

<sup>9</sup> ‘I have seen these people,’ the Lord said to Moses, ‘and they are a stiff-necked people. <sup>10</sup> Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.’

I am angry and I will destroy them. Chilling words.

Anger of course is a threatening emotion. You get angry when you feel hurt or incensed. Anger is the root ultimately of destruction and killing. Jihadists believe they have a divine mandate to unleash God’s anger on those who disobey. And there are precedents for that if you read your Holy Books literally.

Iain McDonald when he spoke in our recent discussion on same sex marriage in the context on how people have used the Bible to bash gay people, urged us to take the Bible seriously but not literally. If you take it literally you are going to get into so much trouble. Taking it seriously you need to know the discussion within scripture on these matters. The debates about the nature of God and suffering and violence and forgiveness. The different views of the human writers as they respond to situations in differing ways. But then we have the life and teaching of Jesus, who Christians believe is the full revelation of God’s character. Thank god for Jesus who shows us a God who doesn’t inflict suffering but who suffers for us, because God loves

us. Taking the Bible seriously means to take it in context, the historical situation it was written and the understandings of the time in which it was written.

Taking it literally means ignoring all of that and ultimately legitimizing acts of hatred and violence: Believing just in a God of anger, who hates us. I'm angry I will destroy you.

In this story neither Moses nor God seemed to want the Israelites at this point, despite all the work they had just been doing on their behalf. Consider the subtle humour betrayed in the text as each seems intent on blaming the other for the excesses of these backsliders.

*"The Lord said to Moses, 'Go down at once! **Your people**, whom **you** brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely...'"* (Ex. 32:7).

To which Moses, not willing to be held solely responsible, ups the ante with his bold response:

*"O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against **your people**, whom **you** brought out of the land of Egypt **with great power and a mighty hand?**"* (Ex. 32:11).

I've been in meetings like this, when someone's best-laid plans have come to naught and there needs to be a fall guy to make things right. It's also a common strategy among parents: "Have you seen *your* son's report card?" It's amazing that anything ever gets done with so much blame

being passed around. We look for someone to blame when the outcome isn't as we planned.

But the exasperation of both Moses and God is understandable, for it had only been a short time ago when the Israelites gave their solemn pledge to the conditions of the covenant: "All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Ex. 24:3b). Such big plans. Such high aspirations. But this was before the forty-day summit. In the absence of their teacher and leader, it was not long before the men started getting grumpy and the women began fiddling with their earrings.

Contrasted to Israel's faithlessness is the faith of Moses. Moses' faith is demonstrated through his intercession with God on the people's behalf.

The people rebelled against God, ultimately. Their foreplay of creating the god of the golden calf was preceded by sexual orgies which accompanied fertility rites. Their apostasy led them to actions of irresponsible immorality. Faithlessness to God leads to a diminishing of moral sensitivity. No God, no absolutes. No judgement, just relative values and what you can get away with.

Moses knows this isn't the case but still stands in the breach and intercedes for the faithless Israelites.

*But Moses sought the favour of the Lord his God. 'Lord,' he said, 'why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? <sup>12</sup> Why should the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth"? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. <sup>13</sup> Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: "I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance for ever."'* <sup>14</sup> Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

This exchange is a startling story about prayer. It seems to suggest that Moses regards prayer not about conforming our will to God's but about conforming God's will to our will; or rather Moses knows that God's will is not always fixed and can be persuaded to bend towards mercy.

Moses 'implores' God. Our version says he sought the favour of the Lord. The Hebrew verb means, literally, 'make someone's face sweet or pleasant.' I remember the sight of a little child reaching up with her hands to push her mother's angry face into the shape of a smile.

Do we as God's people rally and intercede for a world steeped in its own lust and moral decay. A call for many

Moseses who know how to pray intercessory prayers on the world's behalf is desperately needed.

What must the Christian intercede for today? The answer is for the salvation of the lost, the healing of the sick, the hope of the hopeless, the action of the inactive, the power of the powerless, justice for those deprived of justice, integrity where there is corruption, love where there is hate, the will of God, and the Kingdom of the King, the Coming of the Spirit.

Moses' love is demonstrated through his compassion and concern. Moses saw the Israelites' pitiful spiritual illness and wanted to help them. There was a yearning in his heart that they be spared -- even in their foolish state of mind and heart. Moses genuinely was touched by their lack of spiritual understanding and attempted to do something about it.

The theology in the story is the old question about what you do about rebelliousness and sin. Do you abandon the people, destroy them and start again – a bit like the Noah story. But God cannot abandon them – especially as Moses reminds him he has just bothered to save them from Pharaoh. God is torn between the obligation to bring punishment and to cast off, and the obligation to bring mercy.

What is disturbing about this story is that God does massacre many of the rebels. From verse 25 Moses calls

out ‘Who is on the Lord’s side?’ All the Levites rally to him. Then he instructs them to take a sword and go back and forth through the camp killing brother and friend and neighbour.

I told you this passage does not help in our present situation yet it reflects a fallen world of angry people and where that anger can lead them. Katie Hopkins the shock columnist from the Sun said we need a Final Solution to the problem of Islamic Extremism – using language connected to Hitler’s Final Solution of the Jews. And we all know what that means. This is chilling talk.

Jihadis take the final solution when they can’t cope with people who have different beliefs and different lifestyles to what they believe we should have. That is why they are called extremists.

On a less extreme case we have had the vote for same sex marriage in this church last week. Whilst there was a 54% majority of votes for it it fell short of the two thirds majority we agreed would be needed to change the current policy that marriage is only for a man and a woman. We are obviously divided on this issue. There is a difference of opinion. To some it may have come as a shock that so many people voted for same sex marriage. For some it is a disappointment that not more people voted for same sex marriage. You will all have your interpretations of this result and you will all have to make up your minds about how you react to it.

In our tradition, Church meeting is the occasion when we seek to discover God’s pattern for our life together. In this seeking of the mind of Christ a bare majority is never sufficient. We look for consensus. However consensus does not always happen and even when it does it does not always necessitate unanimity. For although, ideally God is guiding one, he will be guiding all, in practice the receiving of guidance is not that simple. As a result, there are occasions when there are some who see things differently.

The question then arises: what do we do if we see things differently? What are the options open to us if, after having conscientiously sought the mind of Christ, and then find ourselves divided in what that mind is? And maybe we are angry at the result?

The fact is that none of us has a monopoly on the Holy Spirit. All of us are fallible. At the time we may well have believed we were right, but on reflection we realize that perhaps we were wrong.

We may still see the strength of our original view but perhaps we are more prepared to recognize that many others of our brothers and sisters have seen things otherwise and we may then want to try and better understand why that is. In theological terms, the church has tested the spirits (see 1 John 4) and the church has been led to make this decision and therefore our quibble is with the leading of the Holy Spirit.

However the decision of the church meeting may result in a struggle to accept it in all good conscience. In the book of Acts Gamaliel one of the Pharisees and a teacher of the law in all conscience couldn't respond to the preaching of the apostles Peter and John but strongly advised his fellow Jews not to oppose them. 'If what they have planned and done is of human origin, it will disappear, but if it comes from God you cannot possibly defeat them. You could find yourselves fighting against God (Acts 5.38-39). But if you can't accept the Gamaliel option sadly the only option is to leave the church and find another church whose direction you can more happily accept. Parting of the ways is usually always more preferable to infighting in the church. Those are the various options when there are differences of opinion.

Moses models for modern leaders how to deal with faithless followers. Moses is remembered as the prophetic leader who had a direct and dynamic relationship with God. They argue, they commiserate, they cajole, they rant, and they care. A healthy relationship with the Holy can include all that and much more. God loves: perhaps God's anger, judgment, and repentance are all grounded in the reality that the creation is beloved of God – you only get angry if you care enough.

But an angry God raises many deep questions and problems. There are many parts of the Bible like here where God gets angry and God's anger leads to destruction. There are also many parts of the Bible that discusses the question

'Why God did you let this happen? Why does bad things happen to innocent people? CS Lewis weeping over the death of his wife did not feel in danger of ceasing to believe in God. 'The real danger', he wrote, 'is coming to believe such dreadful things about him.'

I remember an old lady I knew who suddenly lost her son. She was devastated and confided with me that she cried herself to sleep most nights. 'Why God, why?' was her lament. She fought to keep hold of her faith, even of her life – was it worth living? One night as she lay in bed she described how through her tears she had a picture in her mind of Jesus approaching her. He said no words of condemnation, no words of justification, or explanation. No words of judgement. He just came with tears in his eyes. As he opened his arms to embrace and comfort her she noticed the nail marks on his hands. She recalled how in the stories of Christ's appearances to his disciples after the resurrection, his wounds remain. They may have healed and been transfigured but they still remain. That picture, a very biblical picture, of the wounded Christ embracing her in her pain helped her find the courage to carry on. It was a glimpse of God's suffering yet resurrection glory through Jesus.

As we react to everything from a church meeting decision to an attack on innocent people and our values and freedoms, may God protect us and guide us in our response

and reveal to us his love not hate and help us not to hate but to love in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

The Revd Andrew Mills, Moderator of North Western Synod, reflects on the Manchester bombing, and offers a prayer for us all

We woke this morning to the tragic news of the bomb blast at the Manchester Arena last night, at the end of the concert by Ariana Grande. With 22 dead and more than 50 being treated in hospital, the police are treating this as a terrorist incident. The pain felt for all caught up in this terrible ending to an evening filled with music goes beyond those of us who live in the North Western Synod, affecting our nation as an act of evil has once again destroyed lives and broken the peace of a city community.

- See more at: <http://www.urc.org.uk/media-news/2368-a-prayer-for-manchester.html#sthash.6Uxcf1UL.dpuf>And, in the words of a tweet sent by Ariana Grande, on hearing the news:

*'broken.  
from the bottom of my heart,  
I am so so sorry.  
I don't have words.'*

Gracious God,  
Hear the cries of all people  
in the brokenness of a new day,  
where music is silenced in grief  
for the loss of loved ones.

Jesus, suffering Lord,  
hold in your loving arms  
those caught in the distress of this tragedy  
and sustain all who are working  
to aid those affected.

Spirit of life,  
when words fail us  
speak through us  
your word of Peace  
into broken lives.  
Amen.

- See more at: <http://www.urc.org.uk/media-news/2368-a-prayer-for-manchester.html#sthash.6Uxcf1UL.dpuf>

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<sup>i</sup> <https://barnabasfund.org/news/Editorial-Barnabas-Fund-response-to-the-Manchester-terror-attack?audience=GB>