

RESPONDING TO TERRORISM

Sunday 17th July 2016

Matthew 5:38-48



The massacre of innocent people on the streets of Nice in the south of France has dominated the news in recent days. On Bastille Day 2016 30,000 people gathered on the waterfront to celebrate France's national day. The scene was just like many we witness here in Australia on New Year's Eve or on 26th January when we get together to celebrate our national life.

I am sure we all aware that something terrible happened there on Thursday 14th July. And, in the midst of all the terror and the trauma, a particular image stood out for me as I viewed a picture on the internet of a little girl wrapped in foil lying motionless on the road with a doll beside her. This child was one of the many slaughtered by an incomprehensible, insane act fed by hatred and a complete contempt of human life.

On Friday, our time, a truck was deliberately driven into a massive crowd. Eighty four people died including ten children. A further two hundred and two people lay injured with fifty two of them in a critical condition and twenty five currently on life support.

As I contemplated that image of the little girl lying dead on the Promenade des Anglais I became quite agitated and angry. It could have been my daughter, my grand-daughter or the little girl next door - such was the brutal, vulgar randomness of it all.

And the practice now of training on "soft targets" with what is referred to as "low tech" devices like motor vehicles means everyone is vulnerable.

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In 2010 an Al Qaeda inspired magazine suggested militants *“run over them with your cars and trucks”* and in 2007 we witnessed this when a Jeep Cherokee laden with propane cylinders was driven into the check-in area of Scotland’s Glasgow Airport.

Since the attacks in Paris on 13th November last year, when gunmen and suicide bombers hit a concert hall, a major stadium, restaurants and bars killing 130 people and leaving hundreds wounded, there have been more than 1,000 terror attacks across the world. These have occurred in locations including France, Belgium, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kuwait, Turkey, Somalia, Kazakhstan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and the USA.

We have had incidents here in Australia in recent years and I am sure many of us are now becoming more than a little concerned. How are we to react to these incidents? What are we to do about them?

It’s important, as Christians, to consider these things carefully.

One thing we should not do is to let our anger or our alarm embellish or colour our approach to things. Indeed, those who encourage these acts of terror, those who perpetuate such hideous crimes are basically doing so with the purpose of sowing seeds of angst and suspicion.

They are doing so with the intent of manufacturing discontent and even provoking warmongering among those who are impacted. For, you see, these combatants have resolved to create chaos and fear. Their purpose is to put us on edge generating a real sense of turmoil, confusion and even panic.

With this in mind, it perhaps comes as no surprise that commentators like Andrew Bolt are calling for stronger actions against Islamic groups. Meanwhile newly elected politicians such as Pauline Hanson are calling for a stop to people of Islamic faith migrating or being received as refugees in this country while also calling for a Royal Commission into Islam.

It seems to me such responses are precisely what Islamic State is seeking in the West as young Muslims then become marginalized, as young Islamic people, already alienated and impacted by the reality of war, then become more ostracized and antagonized. Such people become fodder for the recruiters who harness such discontent and channel it into a life of militancy.

Indeed, strong reactions or calls to stop *“burying our heads in the sand”* and to wake up to the fact there is a *“clash of civilizations”* going on or, indeed, there is a war breaking out between the Christian West and the Islamic East, only feeds tensions that are already there.

For you see, Jesus offers a different way. Jesus presents us with another way to all this.

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I think we often forget that Jesus lived in a world of terror. Rome was brutal. Crucifixions, one of the most horrific forms of torture and execution, ringed the city of Jerusalem every day.

And there was talk of revolt where-ever Jesus went. Indeed, not long after Jesus departed this earth, there was a mass uprising in Jerusalem that led to the destruction of the city and the temple. It was a bloodbath with, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, the violent deaths of some 1.1million men, women and children.

We also forget that Paul was once a terrorist. As the zealous Saul, Paul was linked to the persecution, the torture and the deaths of many Christians before he was confronted by Christ on that road to Damascus to receive a change of mind, a change of heart and a massive change of direction in life.

And in this violent, ferocious context, Jesus and Paul brought words of peace and reconciliation.

“Blessed are the peacemakers” Jesus said, “for they will be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

“You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to the other also, and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you go on one mile, go also the second mile...” (Matthew 5:38-42).



“You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you. Love your enemies and pray for those persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:43-48).

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Brothers and sisters in Christ, with these words in mind, and as followers of Jesus, there are four things to consider today.

Firstly, in his teaching Jesus implores us to *“take the log out of your own eye”* (Matthew 7:3). By this Jesus says none of us is perfect. Indeed, when approaching the issue of international terror in our world today we are also challenged to consider why such groups as ISIS actually exist? What led to their formation, in what kind of “soil” have they taken root?

The reality is that the western world has a long history of colonization and exploitation in the Middle East. While this can never absolve ISIS and other terror groups of their hideous actions, it’s important for us to be reflective, humble and even repentant concerning these past events.

For confession and humility stand at the centre of our faith - they contrast to a life of blaming, finger pointing and self-righteous outbursts that push people to the brink, deepen divides and create ugly stand-offs.

For, we are all broken people. We are all people in need of grace. We have all made mistakes and the rise of ISIS and the fostering of Islamic militancy may well have its origins in the greed, the ineptitude and the flawed decisions ingrained in the Western world’s past.

Secondly, as we have just heard, Jesus calls on us the *“turn the other cheek”*, to *“offer your cloak”* and to *“carry the pack the extra mile”*. Or as Paul writes in his famous letter to the Romans, *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.....Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.....if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”* (Romans 12:14-21).

Now this is a very big ask. But remember, Jesus forgave his torturers. Paul gave his life for the sake of the Gospel. And while they died, their truth flourished!



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Now this is a really tough message. But in all of this we learn that, while the body can be killed and life can be terminated, forgiveness cannot be executed, love cannot be eliminated, grace can never be wiped out. And this is what really matters!

Indeed, it is in the laying down of one's life that forgiveness is enacted, it is in self-sacrificial love that love shines and grace abounds! Moreover, when it comes to loving one's persecutor, the Gospel is clear. The only ethic that ultimately works against hatred - is love.

Thirdly, the Good News of Jesus Christ tells us that any fruitful impact, indeed, any effective change that takes place in terms of standing up to and opposing such brutal forces as we witness today in France, in Belgium, Syria, Turkey or in Iraq, comes, not from external interference or decisive, intrusive combat.

Rather such an impact, such a change, comes only through a change in heart. New directions, the establishment of justice and an outbreak of peace come only when the liberating, empowering, joyous spirit of Christ impacts on, and dwells among, God's people.

And here it's essential that we, as followers of Jesus, model this. It's vital that we all share this incredible spirit with others in everything that we do!

And, finally, as followers of Jesus, we are called into community. We are called into a community of love, grace, peace and compassion that we call the "church". Here, in this community, we proclaim all that Jesus teaches. We bear witness to the spirit of the forgiving, liberating Christ who sustains us and feeds us every day.

So who we are and what we do here in West Epping is really important. It's vital for the future of the world!

And what others do in Epping Baptist, St Albans Anglican, St Gerard Majella's Catholic Church, Epping Uniting Church and so forth, also really matters. Being "church" matters because it is here that we bear witness to the very things that offer hope in the midst of growing despair.

Being "church" is crucial because it is here that we receive truth and inherit the very things that can change a world that is becoming more hostile and divided!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, on this Sunday as we mourn the tragic loss of innocent bystanders in France, as we are confronted by the horror of Syria and Iraq, as we are made more aware of those millions who continue to flee persecution and violence across the world, and as we become more uneasy, increasingly fearful and just a little more confused in the wake of ongoing terrorist attacks - remember we are God's people - we are followers of Jesus.

For it is to Christ that we look, it is to Jesus that we cling, it is with our Lord that we journey.

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Today we grieve the horrific loss of so many innocent lives. Today we express concern about global terrorism and what it means for each one of us.

But today, we also celebrate our faith. We acknowledge Jesus is Lord. We confess that it is in Christ we trust - for Christ is our hope, Christ is our future - indeed, Christ is the future for you, for me and for of the whole world!

Amen.



John Barr