

Seventh Sunday of Easter

8am Holy Communion and 10:30am Parish Eucharist, St Paul's, Winchmore Hill

Sunday 28th May 2017

Acts 6:6-14

John 17:1-17

“There was a blast and then a flash of fire, and then Jesus came”.

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

It's a sad sign of our times that there have been a number of occasions since I became curate here at St Paul's that the preacher on a Sunday has been called to talk about another terrorist atrocity. We arrived here in June 2014, and since then there have been terrorist attacks across Europe: in Paris, Brussels, Nice, Berlin and other European towns and cities. In March of this year terror returned to the streets of London, when people were killed and injured in a terrorist attack in Westminster.

And so this morning here we are again; a nation in shock after a suicide bomber last Monday in Manchester attacked young concert goers, killing 22 and injuring 116: the deadliest terrorist attack in the UK since the 7/7 attacks in London in 2005. I will admit that until this atrocity took place I had not heard of the singer Ariana Grande, who had been performing that night at the Manchester Arena. I now discover that she is a singer who has huge popularity among teenagers and young children and especially girls; one can never know or understand the motives of those who carry out such evil, but the nature of the occasion suggests that teenagers and children were the specific target. Suffice to say that the dead include 10 under the age of 20; the youngest an eight year old girl.

You will often find it said that as tragic as this and other events are, of course terrorist attacks take place around the world on a daily basis; adults and children are killed and injured in places

of conflict and war: in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq to name but three countries. And of course each and every life is as precious as any other to our God. But naturally as human beings we get affected by events closer to home; and of course the nature of the Manchester atrocity is that it could equally have been our own children or grandchildren who were caught up in the carnage.

There have been some useful articles on the internet about how to talk to children in the aftermath of such a tragedy. In a world of TV and the internet it is not easy to shield them and of course certainly for children aged 7 upwards they will likely in the end find out the truth. So there is something to be said for being honest about how terrible it is but also putting it in context; such attacks are on the news not just because they are terrible but because they are so very rare – the chances of getting caught up in one are so very minimal. It is also good to be reassure them that 24 hours a day the police work to try to ensure that these things don't happen. And critically, to explain to children and others that it is not the case that there are bad groups of people or indeed that some people are bad, but rather that sometimes people become distorted and end up doing really bad things.

And this last point – that it is not the case that people in themselves are evil but that there is evil in the world which can take over people – is of course fundamental to the Christian faith which we proclaim. For every human being in the world is made in God's image, and every single life is precious in God's sight. And yes that includes not just those killed and injured on Monday evening, but it also includes the life of Salman Abedi, the suicide bomber who carried out Monday's attack. A person made in the image of God, a life precious in God's sight, who had become so distorted that he was able to carry out such evil.

So what is the response of the Christian to such an appalling terror attack? There are three thoughts that I'd like to share.

The first goes to the heart of what I've just been saying, that every human being is made in the image of God and is equally precious in God's sight. As is so often the case after such a tragedy, human beings rush to blame someone else: the Muslim community, the government, the security services etc. Particular attacks on certain faith groups or immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees have become the norm. Yet this is simply not Christian, this is simply not of God. For every life is equally precious in God's sight. The Gospel is unequivocal that the life of the Christian is one of radical inclusion; if we are to play our part in ushering in God's kingdom then we must not just tolerate but rejoice in the diversity of our common humanity, and truly love each other as God loves us. So we need to act as a witness to the world, as we reach out across religious and social divides to support those communities under persecution. And as Fr Philip Corbett reminded us last Sunday – that love for our neighbour begins here at home today. If we do not truly love the person next to us in this church, if we are harbouring a grudge against someone in our family or in our place of work, how can we be witnesses of God's love in the world? And how can we truly love God if we do not love each other?

Secondly, we are of course still in the Easter season – a time for rejoicing and praise as we celebrate our Lord's resurrection. Last Thursday we celebrated the great festival of Jesus's Ascension into heaven, which we heard again in our first reading this morning. Yet I was reminded in a conversation the other day that sometimes – and especially in the face of an atrocity where young people were killed and injured – we need to be a Church of lament. We need to be able to say it is ok to cry, it is ok to scream, it is honestly ok to be angry, even to be angry with God. In our anger we need to have the courage to weep with those suffering. For the Bible tells us that is the human response: Rachel wept for her children at Ramah, the Jewish people wept as they were taken into exile in Babylon, there was a huge outpouring of grief at the slaughter by Herod of the innocent children after the birth of Jesus, Mary at the foot of the

cross wept for her Son. For our God is a God who knows what it is to suffer, he wept at the death of his friend Lazarus, and so he is there with us in our grief.

But thirdly and finally, as St Paul says, we do not weep and grieve like others do for as Christians, through the veil of our tears, we have hope. “Mornings of joy give for evenings of tearfulness’ proclaims the wonderful Epiphany hymn. The world may say to us after Manchester, after Paris, after Nice, after Aleppo, after Iraq, ‘where is your God? ‘Where is our God’ we might ourselves ask. Well the answer is simply that God is there, for he always is just there. In a moving article I read after the Manchester attack the columnist described God’s presence that night as follows: “Evil descended upon Manchester Arena last night: his target was teenagers at a pop concert. He wore a vest packed with explosives and metal bits. There was a blast and then a flash of fire. And then everyone just started running, screaming and crying. And then Jesus came”.¹ For this is the faithfulness, this is the love of God. Where was God that night – he was there in the wonderful response of those who came to help: the heroic members of the emergency services and hospital staff, the taxi drivers who offered free lifts, the members of the public who cradled the injured and the dying, the countless number of residents who opened their doors to offer shelter to those separated from loved ones. God is love, love was there, and love always wins.

And so as we weep that God’s will has been thwarted once more, we do so with hope and the surety that out of every disaster, no matter how terrible, God is always there, re-forming, re-creating, making whole once more, as he did on that very first Easter Day.

After the Ascension of Jesus into heaven we are told that the disciples, including Mary the mother of Jesus, “devoted themselves to prayer” as they waited for the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This week, as we reflect on last Monday’s atrocity and prepare to celebrate the

¹ <http://archbishopcranmer.com/blast-flash-fire-jesus-came-manchester/> Last accessed 28 May 2017.

gift of the Holy Spirit on the feast of Pentecost next Sunday, let us like the disciples devote ourselves to prayer. For in the end that is the most powerful act the Christian can do. Let us pray for our broken nation and world, for an end to terrorism, for greater understanding in our communities, and for ourselves and each other that we will be witnesses to God's love in the world. Let us pray in sorrow and with weeping for those whose lives have been destroyed not just in Manchester but in all terrorist attacks and in all places of war and conflict around the world. But let us pray too in thanksgiving and praise that the victory was won for us on Easter Day, and that in his Holy Spirit...even in the face of such unimaginable evil...Our Lord is there, comforting us, loving us, and making all things new.

“There was a blast and then a flash of fire, and then Jesus came”. **Amen.**

The Revd Stephen Coleman
Interim Priest
St Paul's, Winchmore Hill.