

The true message of faith

Mark 1, 4-11

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Exactly 10 years ago to this very Sunday, on the 9th of January 2005, I stood in this very pulpit to preach on the Baptism of Christ. That day, I started by saying that whilst I set out with every good intention to preach on the lectionary I actually found myself hijacked by events in the world which seem, somehow more urgent and in need of our thoughts.

I'd said that we had heard in the day's reading about the baptism of Christ, just as we have this morning. John the Baptist using the symbolic waters of the Jordan to cleanse people of their sins and Christ himself, submitting to a cleansing in those waters that he didn't need in order to underline it's importance for all of us.

But I didn't preach on that subject because for the previous two weeks, the world had been coming to terms with the power of water in an entirely different and more destructive form. On Christmas night 2004, an earthquake occurred deep in the seabed off the coast of Indonesia. The waters above this quake were massively displaced and a series of huge waves emanated from that epicentre and grew in stature as they travelled towards land – a Tsunami that made landfall with a terrifying force that destroyed all before it, people, animals, buildings, vehicles.

Over 150,000 people were killed and many more died later from disease or injury. It was a catastrophe on a global scale and it received a global response and I asked the question that was on many people's lips at the time, how could God let this happen? What sort of vengeful and evil God do we worship? Does He take pleasure in the suffering that He has caused to innocent people?

Today, 10 years later I find myself in the same position with world events forcing their way into my consciousness and looking for answers from my faith. In this case, the disaster was not natural, it was man made and it happened in the heart of one of Europe's most populous and beautiful cities, Paris. I refer, of course to the killings last week at the offices of Charlie Hebdo and the linked murders of a trainee policewoman and 4 people in a Jewish supermarket at the Porte de Vincennes.

These killings were perpetrated by 4 people who claimed to be doing it in God's name and so, once again, the secular world turns on the religious world and points an accusing finger at all people of faith saying, "This is what following your God leads to – death and destruction". They cite what they claim is the religious underpinning for almost every conflict in history, from the crusades to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. From the streets of Belfast to the streets of Paris.

I find it quite ironic that it tends to be people without a faith who raise these questions most loudly as if to say to those of us who believe, "A Ha – caught you out! – How does your religion work now?". If someone does not believe in God, then why should they try to blame God (someone who for them does not exist) for the violence and disasters of this world?

So I'm not really worried about the atheists trying hard to trap we believers. I'm more concerned with the believers who may have their certainty shaken by the events in Paris.

God created man in His image. He gave us clear rules for living and as we proved ourselves from Adam onward, incapable of following those rules, he sent His Son to teach us by example. Knowing that we wouldn't change – that our fundamental flaws would keep leading us astray, he gave the life of His beloved Son, so that our sins might be forgiven.

God gave us free will so it's seems rich to blame God when we choose to use that free will. It's the same response that we should give people who say 'How could God allow war to happen?' God doesn't choose to go to war – people do. God has chosen to give us free will and to guide us to make the right decisions – we can't blame Him if we make the wrong decisions.

God does not wrap us in cotton wool to protect us from the world around us. He doesn't intervene if things are getting too dangerous. How could he? How could you assess the level of danger that was appropriate for His intervention? How many deaths would be an acceptable disaster and how many unacceptable? Any intervention would inhibit man's free will.

12 people were killed by the murderers at Charlie Hebdo last week. On the same day, almost unreported, 37 people were killed in a terrorist attack in Yemen. Were they less deserving of God's intervention than the French cartoonists?

So if God is not to blame for what happened in Paris then where is he in this? What possible purpose does God serve if he can't protect those who died at the hands of sinful men?

The extraordinary fact is that faith has survived the tests of disaster and loss and grief time and time again. Believers have learned to see the world and life in the world as a freely given gift. They have learned to be open to a calling or invitation from outside their own resources; a calling to accept God's mercy for themselves and make it real for others.

They have learned that there is some reality to which they can only relate in amazement and silence. Religious people have learned to look at other human faces with something of the amazement and silence that God Himself draws out of them. They see the immeasurable value, the preciousness of each life.

The murderers in Paris saw none of that as they killed in what they claimed was God's name. They claimed to be acting as God's avengers to right the wrongs done by satirical cartoonists drawing mocking images of the prophet Mohammed. The astonishing arrogance of this claim has been exposed by the millions of Muslims around the world who have stood up to say, "Not in my name". The thought that God takes offence is laughable, the thought that he wants blood in revenge is outrageous.

The God of Christians, Muslims and Jews must despair at the weakness of His creations. This God of Love must weep at the depths of hate that drive the actions of these killers who called themselves Muslims. But he must also rejoice at the contrasts that also came out this week between the hate of those killers and the love of other Muslims.

Ahmed Merabet was a Muslim and a policeman who was called to the shooting at the Charlie Hebdo offices. He saw the murderers' car coming towards him but he stepped into the road and pulled his gun.

The attackers shot and wounded him immediately and, in probably the most chilling image that we have, one of them calmly walked up to the prone and injured policeman, a fellow Muslim and shot him dead at point blank range. Here was a Muslim who defended with his life, the rights of others to ridicule his faith.

Lassana Bathily was a young Muslim worker in the Jewish supermarket when it came under attack. Without thought to his own safety, he shepherded a large number of the Jewish customers downstairs to the shop's cold storage room and hid them there from the gunman. A young Muslim risking his life to save Jewish people.

Lassana Bathily and Ahmed Merabet are the true images of Islam that I want to take from last weeks atrocities. They were the true men of faith, not the men hiding behind the AK47's. Faith is love and compassion, it is not hate and destruction and we need to respond to last weeks atrocities with love and compassion.

The reaction of the truly faithful is, or should be always one of passionate engagement with the lives that are left, a response that asks not for understanding but for ways of changing the situation in whatever ways are open to us.

The odd thing is that those who are most deeply involved, as sufferers and helpers, are often the ones who spend least energy raging at God. They are most likely to shrug off the great philosophical or religious questions as they focus on two things; a kind of strength and vision just to go on and a sense of the imperative for practical service and love. Somehow in all of this, God simply emerges for them as a faithful presence.

When Christ stepped into the waters of the Jordan he did so to show that he was one of us and one with us. He didn't need the cleansing waters

of baptism but he knew that we did. As always, he chose not to tell us what to do but to show us what to do - to walk alongside us. As Christ walked with us in the waters of the Jordan, so he now walks with those whose lives have been torn apart in Paris last week.

The only people who can speak with authority about these terrible events are those closest to the cost. The rest of us can only listen and then respond. How should we respond? Well we should pray that they will know the strength of God supporting them in their hour of need. And we should pray that the world will learn that love, not hate is the true message of faith.

Tom Crotty