

A Sermon to Launch the 2016 Stewardship Campaign St Mary's, Warwick – Trinity 4

Last Sunday a mass shooting happened at a nightclub in Orlando resulting in 50 deaths. On Thursday a Yorkshire MP, Jo Cox, was murdered in the street whilst seeking to serve her constituents. What can we say and do as a church in the light of such violent atrocities? One preacher (Tiffany Thomas) has said that, in response to Orlando, the role of the Church is to: weep, wail, witness and wait.

Understandably there's been a great many tears shed over these senseless deaths and the church is called to share in **that** lamentation, to *weep* with those who've been bereaved and those who're distressed. There are references to tears throughout scripture and often they're described as one of the ways in which we cry out to God in our dismay.

But Christians are also called to *wail* or howl with protest. It's right to be angry when someone walks into a black church in Charleston, shooting congregation and pastor. It's right to be angry when someone walks into a gay nightclub slaughtering innocent people. It's right to be angry when someone attacks and kills an MP who's doing her job as a public servant. But what we do with our anger about all kinds of perceived injustice is surely at the heart of these tragedies.

So the Church is also called to act as a *witness* – proclaiming God's will to the people. It's called to stand with Isaiah and the prophets, saying to all who'll listen: such violence isn't God's will or God's way. To witness to the truth that the same feelings of anger and hatred that lead men (most often men) to kill innocent people are the same feelings that can sadly make their way into the public life of our politics, religion and other forms of social order. There's a need to name such hatred for what it is: sin – and to name the need for repentance.

And fourth, the Church is called to *wait* with the people – with those who're bereaved and grief stricken; those who're shocked and angry; those who're bemused and struggling to make sense of our damaged world. We must embody hope in the midst of uncertainty and to remind people that God is still here. God's been here before and not just on Good Friday – God's spirit **continues** to reach out with grace and love and strength.¹

Now ... today St Mary's is launching its stewardship campaign and on the face of things that may seem to be something far removed from that description of the Church – a body that weeps, wails, witnesses and waits in the face of such difficult events and hard times. But I think there's a really important connection here that we need to identify and explore. Let me explain.

The murder of those people in the Orlando nightclub and Jo Cox in her constituency make us ask some fundamental questions about what kind of society we want to be. What are the values at the heart of Western culture in all its manifestations on both sides of the Atlantic? Are we a society that's open hearted, compassionate and caring or are we the kind of people who are fearful, apprehensive, and constantly seeking scapegoats.

The French philosopher René Girard (who died last November) wrote a great deal about violence and its place in society. He argued that religion and violence are intimately connected – not that religion is the *source* of **all** violence (a popular view currently) but

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gifted-for-leadership/2016/june/preaching-in-midst-of-tragedy.html?start=1>

that religion is one of the ways in which human beings manage violence in ourselves and our world. And important in this process is an understanding of sacrifice and scapegoating. We can't go into this in great detail now but, in essence, if we're not able to deal with the conflicts within ourselves then we project them onto others who we blame for our problems and who become our scapegoats. And it's surely no coincidence that there has been discussion about the mental health of both perpetrators of these acts of violence in Orlando and Yorkshire.

Please don't get me wrong. I'm not seeking to scapegoat mental health here. The kind of language used by some tabloids about 'mentally ill loners' doesn't help us address the serious and complex issues of mental illness. Nor am I saying glibly: 'Of course, the Church has all the answers.' What I am saying is that churches (and, indeed, others faiths) have a great deal of experience in the language and dynamics of scapegoating which can be of benefit to society if used carefully and reflectively.

From my perspective we seem to have had a great deal of scapegoating during the referendum debate and in the American Primaries much of which has been ill informed and socially divisive. We should be very careful about language and imagery that potentially scapegoats others.

There's a thread which runs through the tragic deaths in Yorkshire and Orlando, through the over-heated debates about the referendum and the presidential elections and even to our stewardship campaign at St Mary's. That thread involves the questions: What are the values which sustain our society? And how do we encourage and promote them? Speaking personally, I hear stories of Jesus bringing healing into the lives of people from all backgrounds and his teaching about not judging others, and St Paul's vision of the Church as an inclusive society in his letter to the Galatians: *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* And I find those things inspiring. They're some of the crucial elements that fire my faith in God and mean I don't lose faith in the Church or, indeed, in humanity. And the other thing that's important for me is the cross of Christ.

Jesus' sacrifice on the cross means that we can reject scapegoats for ourselves and our society. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is about God knowing intimately the depths to which humanity can fall – and we continue to see those depths today. But Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and the empty tomb of the Risen Christ reveal God's eternal and transforming love. We need those in our world more than ever. We need that hope in our society and we continue to need the Church to proclaim a message of hope and redemption, which is why we're running a stewardship campaign to secure a future for St Mary's.

A leaflet's available today to all on our electoral role (and anyone else) along with a letter from our churchwarden, John Luxton, explaining how we can all help and support the ongoing work of this church in this magnificent (yet costly) building. But ... as we've seen so painfully in recent days the church is always more than a building, the church is more than stones we must be here to follow Christ in weeping for, wailing at, witnessing to and waiting with individuals, communities and God's hurting and broken world. If you can, please support us in this vital ministry.

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19th June 2016*