

Sermon preached in Saint Andrew's, St Andrews, 28th May 2017

In the past week we've seen some of the very worst and some of the very best things that human beings are capable of. The calculating slaughter of children and young people gathered together for an evening of celebration and fun. And the selfless response of those who, finding themselves on the scene, put themselves and their own lives at risk to tend to the injured and hold the hands of the dying; the generosity of a community making itself and its resources (including, quite literally, its blood) available to do what had to be done to limit the damage and to begin to make good the hurt and the injury and the suffering and the trauma.

It's very tempting—and inevitably it's a temptation some of the tabloid press has been unable to resist—to reach for the theological and liturgical dictionary, and to brand those who perpetrated the crime as the embodiment of evil.

But we should be cautious about jumping too quickly to such judgments, lest they backfire upon us unfortunately at some point. Even a little consideration of the factors surrounding this atrocity, while doing nothing whatever to justify it or excuse it, compel our recognition that the circumstances (like most human circumstances) are much more complex and messy and difficult than any convenient classification drawing on the simple binary between unsullied good and unthinkable evil tends to suggest, no matter what the headline writers would like us to think.

Horrendous, cruel and wicked though the act undoubtedly was, sickening and tragic as its outcomes are, and outraged though we may properly be, we know, if we bother to stop and think about it, that comparable things happen all the time, albeit generally much less close to home, and so perhaps rather less likely to stir our pity or our sense of outrage. Syrian children die horribly in the streets of their village as chemical weapons rain down upon them. Palestinian children playing football on a beach are slaughtered by mortar bombs loosely aimed at the west bank tenements behind them. Pakistani and Afghani children die in school playgrounds and hospitals as drones and other allegedly 'smart' weapons are deployed to excise or 'take out' key figures in terrorist cells or pockets of extremist militia. And those responsible for pressing the buttons or authorizing the attacks are far less easily (and far less often) classified as the brainwashed, fanatical instruments of evil. Because their actions and their motivations are often far too close to home for comfort.

So, sickening, unjustifiable, unacceptable as Monday's atrocity was and must be judged, we need to be willing to put it in a wider perspective, and at least be even-handed in our judgments when it's not British children, but children anywhere in the world, innocent victims anywhere in the world, whose lives are abruptly torn open or brought to a premature and bloody end by acts of indiscriminate violence. Is there *ever*, can there ever *be*, *any* justification for it? By all means, let's name Monday's horror for what it was and will always remain. But we may wish to be cautious before picking up the first stone.

But what about God? After all, it was done in God's name (allegedly) as such atrocities so often are and have been – whether by religious extremists of one creed or another, or by the political forces who, throughout history, have crusaded against alien and foreign cultures, often in the name of protecting a supposedly 'Christian' civilization and its supposedly superior values from threats allegedly ranged against it by those whose way of thinking and behaving and believing is inconveniently different to its own. I'm tempted to say that the God I read about in the Bible doesn't *need* protecting; he's big enough to look after himself.

But what are we to suppose about God's own *complicity* in an event like Monday night's bombing? It would be a very self-assured faith which, confronted by such dreadful things, didn't find itself asking questions about why God simply stands by and lets such things happen. In fact, I'd go further, and suggest that it would be an uncommonly hard-hearted faith which, faced with such dreadful things, did feel the force of the question 'why? why let such things happen? why not step in and *do* something?); and perhaps even feel anger and outrage not towards the human perpetrators, but towards *God himself* as one who is supposedly in some sense in charge of it all.

There is, I venture to suggest, both something profoundly *right* and something profoundly *wrong* in such responses.

Profoundly *right*, because the outrage, the sense of being sickened, the grief and sorrow and anger—all of that resonates with what God himself feels about such things. As the one who alone is truly 'good', and the source of all goodness in us and in creation, such horrors stand over against God as a denial of all that he is; the very opposite of who he is and who he calls and longs for us and his world to be. Evils which are not just a bad smell under his nose, but a *threat* (were they to win out) to all that God is and all that he stands for.

So, to feel such things—outrage, horror, sickness, sadness, , grief, determination that evil will not win the day—some of the most powerful of human emotions in the face of atrocities, is in effect to 'feel' about them the way that God himself feels about them, or at least as close to that as we are capable of coming.

And yet, there's something profoundly wrong and mistaken about such reactions too, when they take the form of an outraged demand to know what on earth God is *doing*, what on earth God is *playing at*, allowing such things to take place at all, when he could so easily step in and prevent them, or rewind the video and rewrite the outcome.

Don't get me wrong: I don't think it's wrong at such times for us to feel such things, or to ask such questions, or even to direct such questions angrily at God. It's natural enough to feel and to ask such things, and it's perfectly acceptable to get angry and to yell at God and tell him just what we think of the way he has chosen to set things up and allow his creation to play itself out. That's okay, and there's plenty of biblical warrant for doing exactly that. It's always good to be

honest with God. *Always*. And he can cope with it. When you get home today, take just a few moments to flick through the book of Psalms, and see how many times you come across anguish and bewilderment and even anger directed towards God.

But, once the blood has cooled, and the ire abated, as I've said before from this pulpit (and may have plenty of reason to say again in the future), even a brief perusal of the Bible (Old Testament or New) ought to serve to disabuse us of the supposition that God's way of working with the world involves him stepping in, here, there and everywhere to prevent, head off at the pass, or otherwise remove the possibility of even the worst and most cruel and most appalling of human suffering, whether that be through acts of human wickedness or the playing out of nature's seemingly capricious and indiscriminate processes.

We may not like it. We may properly feel angry that God has set things up in such a way that such intervention is not how he typically works. That's okay. Let's tell him so. He'll understand.

But if we're going to do that, then let's at least attend to the place where, above all, he lays bare his soul on such matters. Let's remind ourselves that God shows himself to us chiefly not as some sort of CEO or powerful political mover and shaker—exercising his authority from on high. But as a God who is most appropriately pictured as one in whom there is Father and Son, parent and child; a God in whom, for our sakes and the sake of the world God has made, the Son becomes one of us and shares to the full in what it is to be human in that world—suffering through to its darkest and most grisly conclusion the horror of man's inhumanity to man; a God in whom, for our sakes, the Father is compelled by the depth of his love for the world, to watch as his only Son suffers the vilest attacks of evil, and dies in pain and in distress. A Father in God who suffers the loss of his own Son just as surely as any human mother or father suffers the excruciating loss of theirs.

This is a God who is never far away or remote from those who suffer, but who is united with them *more fully than ever* in their suffering, because he himself suffers and has suffered. A God who never stands aloof and watches as we suffer, but who is always closer to us than we are to ourselves, surrounding us, enfolding us, embracing us as we suffer; uniting our suffering with his own, and with redemptive effect.

This is a God who has chosen, in his eternal wisdom and his goodness, *not* to create a world whose own final goodness and blessedness should be secured by the prevention of evil, but by letting it run its awful and painful course, until it has done its worst, and burned itself out. And who holds us, embraces us, sustains us in being, until it has burned itself out and has been burned out of us. Who in the meanwhile strengthens and creates and suggests ever new initiatives of goodness in us and in the world, ever new possibilities for goodness in us, and in the world. And who grieves, and groans, and is anguished when instead we turn away from or smother or throttle them before they are properly born and grow.

So, where was God on Monday evening as the crowds poured out of the Manchester Arena, and a solitary figure with a deadly backpack made his way into the foyer and prepared to detonate its contents?

Did God allow the suicide bomber to end his own life, with all its *own* young promise and possibility of goodness, and in doing so bring to a cruel end the lives and well-being of so many—children, parents, grandparents and carers? Yes.

Did God stand idly by and watch, unmoved, as all this happened. No! Because every manifestation of evil, large or small, and the dreadful suffering it generates, causes God to suffer too. That's the cost, to God, of creating and holding a world like ours—destined for goodness and blessing, but a goodness and blessing that must be won and purchased at a price only God himself can pay.

Where was God on Monday evening? Right there, in the foyer, embracing *all* those who suffered and died, holding them close, embracing them in his power and his love, feeling that mixture of outrage, pain and love that we ourselves, at our best, feel about such things.

And reiterating his promise. Urging us *not* to lose hope, but to *trust* him. Summoning us always to meet evil with goodness, one moment at a time, one step at a time, one decision at a time. And to open ourselves again and again to his love and goodness, infused into us thanks to his own becoming one of us and uniting us to himself in Christ, and nurtured and empowered by the presence in us of his Spirit. And promised as the final end of all things, when God will be our God, and we will be God's people, and God will at last be all in all.