

**AFTER THE MANCHESTER SUICIDE BOMB ATROCITY -  
a sermon at the 10.30 Eucharist which attempts to face some of the  
issues arising, by David Clark**

The readings were Acts 1:6-14; John 17:1-11

How can I glorify the Lord Jesus, or even trust in God,  
when I've just seen the most horrible carnage,  
and its aftermath, in violated bodies strewn across the foyer of the Manchester  
Arena?

How can I sing 'Rejoice, the Lord is King'  
when 22 mostly young and beautiful people have suddenly lost their lives  
by the hand of a misguided 22 year-old Islamist,  
who was so intent on gaining a blissful heaven through martyrdom  
that he was willing to kill, destroy and maim so many people?

How do I lift up my heart and voice to rejoice,  
when I am so sad for the dead,  
whose pictures have covered the front pages of papers,  
and when I am so sad for the wounded,  
and when I am so sad for the bereaved?

The horror and death is, for the time being, over.  
The pain of wounds and the pain of bereavement will continue,  
but there will be windows of opportunity for joy in recovering life.

The Newsletter of the Council for Christians and Jews had this sentence:

We have no choice but to move forward in hope, together as  
communities, with 'defiant' kindness to the other. Nowhere was this  
kindness more evident than in Manchester this week following the attack.  
Our thoughts and prayers are with all those affected.

What 'defiant kindness' means, I think, is that we – all people of all kinds and  
colour, shall summon up our reserves of concern and compassion for our

neighbours. For the attack is against 'the other' – those who are different. Islamists cannot tolerate those who do not conform to their way of thinking. Well, under God, we are learning something different: we are learning love and compassion for those who are different from us, because we recognise the differences which God has created, and we perceive God's glory in them too.

In the ISIS Caliphate, they no doubt speak of the glorious martyrs who sacrifice themselves in suicide bombing. But Monday's tragedy, the apparently senseless killing by shrapnel of innocent people, is the very opposite of what Jesus is praying for in today's Gospel. Jesus is praying for glory. So what I hope is that we shall get a real grip on the nature and identity of true glory.

I speak metaphorically: what is down there in the dust, as it were, is the profoundly wicked sin of the Manchester murders, covered in the grime and filth of the sick ideology which inhabited the mind of Salman Abedi and his fellow Islamists; whereas up there in the heavenly realms is the glory and holiness of God. At Ascensiontide, we pray in today's Collect, that we too may be exalted 'to the place where our Saviour Christ has gone before.'

I asked you to pay particular attention to the Gospel, because it is sometimes difficult to get at what John has written about Jesus. Here, John describes Jesus praying *before* his arrest, trial and crucifixion, but also – it is seen as if *after* Jesus has finished the work he came to do. The gospel writer John describes Jesus saying to God, "I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do" (that must mean his death by crucifixion). "So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory I had in your presence before the world existed."

So here is the assumption that Jesus was by the side of God – eternally – he was always there – part of the Trinity with the Holy Spirit. Of course this is picture language to try and grasp the mystery of the glory of Jesus and the glory of God. In eternity, there is no concept of linear time.

So I will rejoice in the glory of God. But there are paths of supposed glory down which I do not intend to walk. They are too triumphalistic. The imagery of Wesley's last verse which we sang just now has a sinister ring:

He sits at God's right hand  
till all his foes submit,  
and bow to his command,  
and fall beneath his feet.

This reminds me of the bloody Crusades, and the insistence of submission which Crusaders often demanded of their foes. As Christian people, we have to be very careful about whom we label as foes, remembering Jesus' word, "He who not against me is for me."<sup>1</sup> And as promoters of the Christian cause, we do not require submission: we rejoice with those who join us in our obedience to God in Christ.

Fortunately we have as our last hymn, one by Canon Michael Saward, who in his long life as a faithful Christian priest, also experienced the same sort of evil and wickedness as the Manchester atrocity.

*On 6 March 1986, a gang of burglars broke into the Saward family's home at lunchtime. Saward and his daughter Jill's then-boyfriend, David Kerr, were tied up and beaten, both suffering fractured skulls, while Jill (who died in 2017) was raped. Jill became an author and campaigner for victims of rape and sexual violence. She was the first rape victim in England to waive anonymity.*<sup>[Wikipedia]</sup>

Michael Saward and his daughter rose above the evil, and lived to worship and glorify God in their own lives. In the same way we hope to do so as well.

The young man who exploded his suicide bomb thought he was doing God's Will. As a defiant protest we, too, need to think about God's Will for us. St Paul wrote:

"Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise; think on these things." Think on *these* things.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 9:40 'For he that is not against us is for us.' Cf. Luke 9:50: 'For he that is not against you is for you.'  
But: Matt 12:30 'For he that is not with me is against me.' // Luke 11:23.

Note: For those who like to follow up some of the issues raised here, I am grateful to Paul Jenkins who recommended to me *The Way of the Strangers – Encounters with the Islamic State* by Graeme Wood (2017). From the blurb: “Drawing on insights from a wide spectrum of Islamic scholars, Wood explores the group’s apocalyptic dogma and the theology that influences its expansionist project. The Islamic State is bent on murder and apocalypse, but its recruits find meaning and fellowship in a utopian dream. This appeal of the Islamic State is key to understanding it - and predicting what its followers will do next.” This is a readable book. Heavier but no less interesting books are by Richard Bonney, former Professor of History at the University of Leicester: *Jihad – from Qur’an to bin Laden*, (2004) and *False Prophets – The ‘Clash of Civilisations’ and the Global War on Terror* (2008).