

## **Sermon for Evensong on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, 26th March 2017**

*Micah 7, James 5 - #PrayforLondon*

There is a talk-show host, who sometimes appears on the Andrew Marr show reviewing the newspapers, called Julia Hartley Brewer. After the terrorist atrocity in Westminster on Wednesday she published a Twitter message which said, "Can everyone stop all this 'pray for London' nonsense?" Appalling; but that's what she said. She went on, "It's these bloody stupid beliefs that have helped create this violence in the first place". Needless to say, a large number of people immediately commented on Twitter that her message was totally inappropriate and insensitive.

But Arron Banks, the rich man who has provided a lot of funding for UKIP, also tweeted, equally unpleasantly, to the effect that terrorist incidents such as the one that had just happened will go on happening for as long as there is unrestrained immigration. And I understand that Nigel Farage expressed similar sentiments linking the terrorist incident with his campaign against immigration.

Against this chorus of prejudice, one central London vicar tweeted that his church was open for prayer for anyone who would like to come and spend some quiet time there.

[\[https://twitter.com/giles\\_fraser/status/844586052601942017\]](https://twitter.com/giles_fraser/status/844586052601942017)

Always, terrible events bring out the best in many people. There was an MP using his first aid skills to try to save the mortally wounded policeman; doctors and nurses, who ran across the bridge from St Thomas' Hospital; and most strikingly, the medical teams who gave as much help to the dying terrorist as they did to the wounded policeman. Both died, but in both cases they received the full attention of the emergency services. Love your enemies, indeed.

It was a sad business, which those of us, who work in London and who worked in London during the IRA bombing campaign, and subsequently in the face of the 7/7 attacks, found horribly reminiscent. There is fear. People worry that after one atrocity there will be others. Is it safe to use the Tube? Or catch a bus? Or indeed, just to go into town?

But people have reached the conclusion that, if you start to give up on your normal life, the terrorists will have won. So with or without a cup of tea, our normal way is to carry on regardless. There is, though, a real temptation to become prejudiced against groups of people that one is tempted to think are responsible. It is, of course, a complete failure of logic to blame all Muslims

for terrorist incidents like the one on Wednesday. Indeed there is nothing in Islam, so far as I know, which would justify terrorism of this type. But in their minds, people still do link extremism with Islam, and with Islamic immigration, however unjustified this is.

After morning prayers here on Thursday, Godfrey and I talked a bit about why terrorists do what they do. What makes them terrorists? Look at our lessons today. From the prophet Micah:

*Woe is me! for I am as when they have gathered the summer fruits, as the grape gleanings of the vintage: there is no cluster to eat ....*

*The good man is perished out of the earth: and there is none upright among men: they all lie in wait for blood; they hunt every man his brother with a net.*

And so on. What a dystopian vision! It is a vision of social breakdown. People are not looking out for each other any more, caring for each other: 'Love thy neighbour as thyself' is observed in the breach. That's the prophet Micah. Micah was a humble man, not a nobleman like his contemporary Isaiah. He saw things from the bottom of society. It was 3,000 years ago. But what about today's fractured society? Huge inequalities. 'There is no cluster [of grapes] to eat.' Down to the food bank you'll have to go.

But it doesn't get much better, even for the rich people. In James' letter - although James the brother of Jesus was probably not the author of this particular letter, a lot of the teaching reflects what Jesus himself taught - it says that riches won't bring you happiness; your sins will find you out.

*Behold, the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth.* It cries out.

If you cheat, and don't pay your workers, everyone will get to hear about it. But in particular our Almighty Father will know, when you come to say your prayers to him, that you do not have clean hands. Contrast what James has to say with what the unedifying Julia Hartley Brewer said.

*Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms. Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord...*

This is not 'bloody stupid beliefs', as the talk-show woman inelegantly put it, and it isn't something which helps to 'create violence'. The church is a place of caring, a place of compassion. James says,

*And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.*

*Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.*

Prayer 'availeth much'. It helps a lot.

James looks back to Elias, to Elijah, who was

*... a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months.*

*And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit.*

His prayer was fruitful. In the same tradition, as Christians, we do 'pray for London', and we do think that it is a good thing for churches to be open for people to come in and pray in times of stress and and trouble.

And it's quite clear that it isn't religion that causes terrorism. When we were discussing this after morning prayers on Thursday morning, we were thinking that, for years, many of us have been guilty of casual racism, not necessarily overt or intentional: but just not treating black people as the same as white, subtly devaluing them. It's still going on.

I read the other day that it is still true that black people looking for jobs, who have names which reflect their ancestry in Africa and India, for example, may not be invited to interview; but if the same people change their names in their application forms to quintessentially English names like John Smith, they get plenty of interviews. It's racism.

There is still petty racism and there are glass ceilings. People who look different, who may have a different skin colour, find that above a certain level very mysteriously they never get promoted. What must it feel like? Does immigration have anything to do with it? The terrorist in Westminster, who was of mixed race, apparently was originally known by a very English-sounding name, and indeed he was born in Kent. The terrorists of 7/7 were all born in the UK. There were no immigrants involved at all. Immigration has no necessary connection with terrorism.

Of course, where people have suffered indignities and discrimination, it does not excuse terrorism, but it might go some way to explaining it. People remembering Martin McGuinness talked about the situation in Ireland during the 'troubles', and said that, for Catholics in Northern Ireland, the situation was a sort of apartheid. Where the word 'apartheid' started, in South Africa, Nelson Mandela explained how he had come to the view that, although he was a fine lawyer, the law would not overcome the effects of apartheid, and

the only way to fight it was by armed struggle - by terrorism. It is said, and although it seems trite, nevertheless there is a real sense in which it is true, that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. It depends on which side of the big house's garden fence you are standing.

The right response, for us as Christians, is what Archbishop Justin highlighted in a statement in the House of Lords last week. This is what he said.

*".. I want ... , to refer to something that seems to me to go deeper, to something that is really at the foundation of our own understanding of what our society is about, and to do that in three very simple, very brief pictures.*

*"The first is of a vehicle being driven across Westminster Bridge by someone who had a perverted, nihilistic, despairing view of objectives, of what life is about, of what society is about, that could only be fulfilled by death and destruction.*

*"The second is of that same person a few minutes later, on a stretcher or on the ground, being treated by the very people he had sought to kill.*

*"The third is of these two Houses [of Parliament], where profound disagreement, bitter disagreement, angry disagreement is dealt with not with violence, not with despair, not with cruelty, but with discussion, with reason and with calmness.*

*"... it seems to me that those three pictures point us to deep values within our own society ... which is the sense that comes from ... a narrative that is within our society for almost 2000 years.*

*"That speaks of – at this time of year as we look forward to Holy Week and Easter – ... a God who stands with the suffering, and brings justice, and whose resurrection has given to believer and unbeliever the sense that where we do what is right; where we behave properly; where that generosity and extraordinary sense of duty that leads people to treat a terrorist is shown; where that bravery of someone like PC Keith Palmer is demonstrated, that there is a victory for what is right and good, over what is evil, despairing and bad." [<http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5848/london-attack-archbishop-of-canterbury-responds-in-house-of-lords>]*

I can't improve on that.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant