

Christ or the angry crowd?

26 June 2016

Luke 9:51-62

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

The USA and much of the world were rocked by the Orlando Nightclub Shooting of a fortnight ago. Forty-nine people were killed, and another 53 were wounded, when Omar Mateen, a 29-year-old American, went on a shooting spree at the Pulse gay nightclub, before being shot dead by Orlando police.

His motivation has been the subject of speculation. Mateen had claimed to be acting on behalf of the group known by various names, including Islamic State and ISIL. But the suggestion has also been made that Mateen was a regular patron at the club and may have been struggling to accept his sexual orientation. We really do not know, and speculation is rarely helpful.

There was a swift public reaction to the massacre, and a massive outpouring of grief. For the most part, people were sympathetic to the plight of the victims and their families. But not everyone.

"Are you sad that 50 paedophiles were killed today?" asked Pastor Roger Jimenez from Verity Baptist Church (an independent sect in Sacramento, California, that is not associated with any mainstream Baptist church) in his sermon later that day.¹

"Um no. I think that's great. I think that helps society. I think Orlando, Florida, is a little safer tonight. The tragedy is that more of them didn't die. The tragedy is I'm kind of upset he didn't finish the job – because these people are predators. They are abusers."²

Jimenez went on to criticise the government, saying he wished gay people would be put in front of a firing squad.³

"I wish the government would round them all up, put them up against a firing wall, put the firing squad in front of them and blow their brains out," Jimenez said.⁴

Not being without fault myself, I am not really in a position to judge or condemn Jimenez. But I do feel I am entitled to point out that what he says reflects badly on all Christians, and that he does not speak for me. Or for any other Christian I know. Unfortunately, he was not the only church leader to express such sentiments. And people will hear them, and genuinely believe this is what Christians are like.

Just in case in case you are all now expectantly waiting for me to wade into the minefield that the theology of human sexuality is, I should tell you I am not going there today. I have my own views on the subject, as do all of you. And I would be extremely surprised if we all agreed. But I would hope you would share my disgust that a church leader has not only endorsed a sickening act of outrageous violence, from the pulpit, but said it did not go far enough.

In today's reading from the Gospel According to St Luke, Jesus and his friends are on their way to Jerusalem. A careful reading of the scriptures suggests that by this stage, Jesus is not just accompanied by twelve disciples, but a multitude of followers. And this would make finding somewhere to say something of a logistical nightmare, which is perhaps the main reason why the Samaritan village wouldn't receive them. James and John want to destroy the Samaritan village for its inhospitality, which is not really surprising

given Jews and Samaritans had a mutual loathing for each other at that time. Jews were Jews, and Samaritans were Samaritans.

But Jesus rebukes them. His message was for everyone. As it says so beautifully in *A New Zealand Prayer Book*, “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile; in Christ there is no discrimination of gender, class or race.”⁵

The texts we have available today only give us tiny snippets of what Jesus said to his followers. And while some can appear relatively straightforward, others can seem frustratingly cryptic. It would seem many who want to follow him either do not fully understand the cost of true discipleship, or want to add conditions, so that their discipleship is on their terms.

To one who declares he would follow him everywhere, Jesus said, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’⁶ Does this potential disciple really understand that to follow Jesus would mean having to give up all home comforts and go wherever his mission required him to go? Possibly not.

Another wants to bury his father before he joins Jesus. And Jesus said, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’⁷ Burying one’s father is one of the most important obligations for a Jewish man, so Jesus’ statement is pretty radical. So is saying ‘No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God,’ to the one who wanted to farewell his family.

But I consider these should not be taken as literal instructions to ignore their obligations to their families. Rather, I see them as reminders that family obligations are secondary to following Jesus, and proclaiming the coming of God's kingdom,⁸ which I see as being the realisation of God's reign of justice and peace.

Those who strive to follow Jesus today are also called to proclaim the coming of God's kingdom. But to proclaim the word is not enough. We need to reveal it in our words and actions. Jesus gave us two simple commandments: to love God; and to love others.⁹ But we can hardly be seen to be following Jesus' most fundamental teachings if we spread hatred instead of love. It is no secret that violence breeds violence. Or that love breeds love. And forgiveness breeds forgiveness. Even as he was being crucified, Jesus prayed for forgiveness for those who were torturing him to death, demonstrating beyond any doubt that forgiveness is the right response to violence. And that is a pretty hard act to follow.

Our Epistle reading today from St Paul's Letter to the Galatians reinforces Jesus' teaching, 'For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'¹⁰

From small acts of love grow bigger ones. I will never forget the image I saw of Christians protecting Muslims while they prayed during the protests in Cairo in 2011.¹¹ This was not an isolated incident; I have read of many similar actions, the most recent being that on Fridays in Cameroon, Christians guard mosques, while Muslims pray. And Muslims return the favour, by protecting churches during Sunday services.¹² I have even read of Christians building mosques. And, I might add, of Muslims building churches.

Such acts are not meaningless gestures. They bring light where there is darkness, and they give hope where there is despair. And I believe that when we show love to others, we are revealing the Christ to the world, and we are proclaiming the coming of God's kingdom.

The alternative is being those who spout hateful rhetoric, and call for violence against those whom they consider to be different to them. They are the embodiment of the frenzied mob that called for Jesus to be crucified. Our words and actions show who we follow. Are we like Christ? Or are we like the angry crowd that had him killed?

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26 June 2016

<http://theword.tk>

¹ <http://www.abc10.com/news/local/sacramento/sacramento-baptist-pastor-praises-orlando-massacre/243211965>

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ *A New Zealand Prayer Book* p478

⁶ Luke 9:58

⁷ Luke 9:60

⁸ Luke 9:62

⁹ Matthew 22:36-40

¹⁰ Galatians 5:14

¹¹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1353330/Egypt-protests-Christians-join-hands-protect-Muslims-pray-Cairo-protests.html>

¹² <http://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/cameroon-christians-protect-mosques-on-friday-muslims-guard-churches-on-sunday/>