

Sunday 11th January 8.00am, 10.00 am

JeSuisCharlie

Ok -an obvious and impossible question.

Does being a Christian make any difference to the way we respond to the horrific events in France this week?

Each one of us will have seen and heard the violence and evil unfold. Will have seen into the eyes of those who were actually there, or who have lost the people they loved most in the world. Our very own David and Brenda were in Paris at the time and I'm sure they will carry for ever the image and sounds of the city trying to cope and respond they best they could.

We will also, I hope, have been profoundly moved by the huge response of people in France and around the world - solidarity, compassion, standing up for the key values of freedom and liberty. 'Je suis Charlie' - not necessarily agreeing with all that they published, but standing up for their right to do it.

We will have listened to many Muslims making clear and gracious statements that this was not done in their name and asking for calm -no backlash.

We have recognised the almost inevitable anti-Semitic dynamic to the whole tragedy.

We have, I guess seen the very worst and the very best faces of humanity condensed in to one traumatic week.

Before we go on the discuss the possible Christian dimension to this, let's stop for a moment and remember that, although there are large ideologies at stake here - there are real individuals, and real bitter loss- at the core of it all.

So let us begin, with the human beings. Let it always be about the human beings:

These are the names of the real people killed:

- Stéphane "Charb" Charbonnier, 47 (editor)
- Bernard Maris, 68 (economist)
- Georges Wolinski, 80 (cartoonist)
- Jean "Cabu" Cabut, 78 (cartoonist)
- Bernard "Tignous" Verlhac, 57 (cartoonist)
- Philippe Honoré, 73 (cartoonist)
- Elsa Cayat (columnist)
- Michel Renaud (a guest)
- Frederic Boisseau (building maintenance worker)
- Franck Brinsolaro, 49 (a police officer)
- Moustapha Ourrad (copy editor)... It's not Muslims vs. cartoonists, as long as there are Muslim cartoonists.
- Ahmed Merabet, 42, (police officer)... A Muslim who died protecting the cartoonists from Muslim terrorists. Muslim vs. Muslim.

And brothers Said Kouachi and Cherif Kouachi, and Hamyd Mourad — the shooters, with a legacy of crime behind them.

And that's just the Charlie Habdo part of the story...

Silence

So the primary reaction is surely grief.

We begin where we are, where our hearts are. Let us take the time to bury the dead, to mourn, and to grieve. Let us mourn that we have created a world in which such violence seems to be everyday. We mourn the eruption of violence. We mourn the fact that our children are growing up in a world where violence is so banal.

The same day of the Paris shootings, there was another terrorist attack in Yemen, one that claimed 37 lives — even though this tragedy did not attract the same level of world attention. There were no statements from presidents about the Yemen attack, no #JeSuisCharlie campaigns for them.

News out of Nigeria tells us that up to 2,000 people have just been slaughtered by Boko Haran -Let us grieve, let us mourn, and let us mourn that not all lives seem to be

given the same level of worth.

The second response which I firmly believe we need is control our rhetoric. The more we frame this as a huge historic clash of civilisations, the more we call it war – rather than the wicked actions of a few evil bastards, the more we force good and moderate Muslims to choose between their faith and heritage and our Western Society. This is both ethically wrong -discriminatory, and counterproductive. We must use the language of unity - working together is the only way.

Matthew Parris in the Times yesterday made this point very well: He said:

'There is a line to be trodden here -the line between anger and panic, the line between holding our ground or raising the stakes, the line between answering in a firm strong voice, or shouting so loud as to play into the hands of nobodies pitching for fame'....

There is a way forward but:

'It is not by Christian was in Arab lands. It is not by talk of a clash of civilisations. It is not by the dramatisation of terrorist incidents and their projection on to a Hollywood screen filled with abstractions about 'terror' 'crusade' and 'evils' It is by the routine and businesslike prosecution of crime and the unyielding maintenance of order. It is by the quiet refusal to censor or gag our own free media. It is by the dogged insistence on the common criminality of violence. It is by a subtle media consensus around propaganda designed to portray jihadist as failures, loners and disturbed -not Satanic monsters -dwarves not giants.'

He said this in the context of the old Sufi wisdom ' this too will pass' -The twin towers happened and life continued, the London bombings happened and life continued. This too will pass.....

So now we are back at our opening question. Matthew Parris is of course a well know atheist. He holds the very values that we all wish to protect -those of a western

liberal democracy -the most fundamental of which is probably the freedom to go to work in the morning without being killed by people who disagree with what you think.

But is there a further, deeper response that our own Christian faith calls us to?

I asked this of my friends on Facebook -and got lots of thoughtful responses -this is what one guy said:

'The God of Abraham whom Jews, Christians & Muslims worship, does not answer the pen with the gun. The distinctively Christian voice in this, which many find so hard to understand, is: 'when he was abused, he did not return abuse' This is taken to be the response of the weak, when in fact, because it is so counter-intuitive, it is the mark of the strong. Jihadism utterly fails to grasp this central concept of Abrahamic faith. Orthodox Muslims are right to see it as a betrayal of the central values of Islam.'

So.....could it be that looking for a specially Christian response at this time isn't helpful? Perhaps part of the lesson is about the dangers of tribalism - identifying too closely only with people of a particular ethnic or religious background and not properly valuing the safety and feelings of those who are less valued in the society or circles in which we move.

In church this morning however, as I'm sure you can see is edging us towards the crucifixion.

Think of the contrast. America -twin towers - and the response: 'We will not let them get away with this' and the resulting years of death and pain and terror, mostly inflicted on innocent people. Jesus on the cross -with the power in his little finger to annihilate his oppressors - forgave and then died.

At one level of course this is universal. It is the way to be human. We call ourselves Christian when we identify with Him , make Jesus' values our values and try to live them out with God's help.

Of course as individuals in some ways our potential to make a difference is limited.

But there is a holy response to what we have lived this week; if we were careful and moderate in our

conversation that would be a start. Watch what you say about Muslims -that it is not racist or discriminatory. Remember the Crusades, or indeed that our Church right now considers it ok to deprive someone of the job for what they believe. We are each locally responsible for the quality of rhetoric on this subject. We can make it worse, we can make it better.

Far tougher response? The radical heart of our faith.

You can go home and forgive the person who has done you wrong. Maybe you should have done it years ago. Do it today -because that way you reduce the amount of pain and anger in the world -just by your little act you have the power to make the world a bit less angry and violent. Of course it's hard, but I'm guessing that what you need to do isn't actually to forgive someone who has murdered the personal you love, and that a huge amount of the pain you carry is to do with the fact that you can't let go rather than the act itself.

By his death on the cross Jesus gives us all the freedom to live lives that are not controlled by anger and violence, that are free to shake off the bitterness of lack of forgiveness -lives that really do pray for those who are our enemies.

Let us pray:

A prayer for peace in our world

**Make your ways known upon earth, Lord God,
your saving power among all peoples.
Renew your Church in holiness
and help us to serve you with joy.
Guide the leaders of all nations,
that justice may prevail throughout the world.
Let not the needy be forgotten,
nor the hope of the poor be taken away.
Make us instruments of your peace
and let your glory be over all the earth. Amen**