



“God’s love has a race, a religion, and a creed”

“Hate has no race, no religion, no creed.”

The people were targeted because they were gay. That’s the only thing we know for sure. And that they were killed allegedly in the name of God. By some evil distortion of anything we could call religion, the shooting spree at the gay night club in Orlando made no distinctions: everyone was equally the target of one man’s hatred.

And in this country, the only thing we know for sure are Jo Cox’s dying words and the tragic way in which they sound out what many of us feel in the face of such a senseless death: “My pain is too much.” The day before she was killed, the Labour MP Jo Cox retweeted a photo of a demonstration that took place not far from this church. It was a show of solidarity with the Orlando victims. **The tweet read “from the heart of London’s LGBT community.”**

It was the last tweet she ever sent, and it was a reference to a photo showing two signs rising above the crowds in Soho. One sign had the words “LOVE WILL WIN.” And next to it, another sign had the words “ISLAMOPHOBIA IS NOT THE ANSWER.”

The terrorist wants to be feared. The lone shooter wants to instill fear in others. The suicide bomber wants to master with fear and conquer with hate. Here, however, we gather to tell a different story.

When we met last week, we were reminded that for Muslims, this is the holy month of Ramadan. It is a period of fasting and prayer. And some of us in this congregation have taken up the invitation to join in the fast for one day, today, to symbolically give expression to the common values we share with our Muslim neighbours. An Interfaith breaking of the fast after sundown will take

place here, tonight, with a meal shared in the company of London’s mayor, Sadiq Khan.

When Lindsay—on behalf of St James’s Church—extended this invitation in her sermon last Sunday, **little did we know that the fast would become also a symbolic protest against the seeds of fear that some would like to plant between our communities of faith.** The story we have to tell in church is a counter-story, a counter-narrative, to the hatred, violence and fear that has resulted in so much death this week. Today that counter-narrative is laid out for us in the words of St Paul, in his letter to the Galatians:

“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are children of Abraham fulfilling God’s promise.”

Paul the apostle—as a Roman citizen and as a Jew who followed Jesus—knew what it was to be rejected by one community, and persecuted by the other. And Paul knew that violence in the name of God contradicts the biblical script that Christianity and Judaism read as God’s holy word.

But of course, Islam also takes the biblical writings as God’s Word. In fact, the three religions look to the pilgrim faith of Abraham and his family on their journey as the beginning of the story of God who is One. God whose will is to unite all people under his grace, and to transform every life according to his unfolding purposes.

In this story, religious violence—taking life in God’s name—is a sacrilege against the Author of life who holds us in the hollow of his hand.

Now some of you will know the title *Not In God's Name*. It's the most recent book from the former Chief Rabbi, Lord Jonathan Sacks. The book reminds us that for Christians, Muslims, and Jews, Abraham, is remembered as God's partner in the story of salvation.

And yet, says Rabbi Sacks, Abraham "ruled no empire, commanded no army, conquered no territory, performed no miracles and delivered no prophecies. [But,] though he lived differently from his neighbours, he fought for them and prayed for them in some of the most audacious language ever uttered by a human to God." In the face of man's inhumanity to man, Abraham dares to hold God to account saying "Shall the Ruler and Judge of all the earth [remain silent and] not do justice (Gen 18.25)?"

This was an extraordinary claim, "It said that every human being, regardless of colour, culture, class or creed, was in the image and likeness of God." And so Abraham "sought to be true to his faith and a blessing to others regardless of their faith."

So for Rabbi Sacks each of the Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—is most truly itself when it sees that **"It is not our task to conquer the world, or enforce uniformity of belief. It is our task to be a blessing to the world."**¹ But you and I know the reality: we have ignored this story many times across the centuries. And many times, God's purposes for humanity have been distorted by naked will to power.

The political philosopher Hannah Arendt famously coined the phrase "the banality of evil." This was in response to the cowardly claim from those responsible for the Holocaust that the extermination of millions of Jews may have been systemic, but it was nothing personal; that their part was in the

¹ Quotations contextualised in fidelity to the source. See Jonathan Sacks (2015), *Not In God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*; London: Hodder & Stoughton.

end "just following orders."

Evil unleashed in Orlando earlier this week was no banality. It was evil personified in the hatred of one individual against an entire community. And there was no banality in the violence unclenched against the MP Jo Cox outside her surgery in Yorkshire on Thursday.

We don't know what motivated the killing. And it isn't for us to judge what role the man's deranged mental state played. And we can only hope that his arrest brings to an end one episode in the far-right ideology that the reports have suggested.

But that such things can happen to a charitable and underserving person in the course of serving her constituency is symptomatic of evil on a scale we just cannot make sense of. Where does that hatred come from? God, help us, because our hearts simply cannot bear it.

Following the death of his wife, Jo Cox's husband in his grief tweeted to say: **"Hate doesn't have a creed, race or religion, it is poisonous."**

This epitaph could well summarise the exposition at the heart of today's Gospel reading: **"Evil has no race, no religion, no creed."** We read in the Gospel: "A large herd of swine was feeding on a hillside; and the demons begged Jesus to let them go. So he commanded them. And the demons came out of the man and entered the swine. And the swine rushed headlong down the steep bank...."

Evil makes no distinction between destroying life in a herd of swine and destroying the life of a man. But the Gospel's counter-narrative is that, in his mercy, the Son of God, stops at nothing to release one person from suffering.

And so here is what I want to say today: Hate has no race, no religion, no creed. But the love of God most certainly does.

Today, in this Gospel, love has a creed: the

mercy of God we see in Jesus Christ. Love has a race because Christ wears the face of the human race. Love has a religion and it comes to us in the story of the merciful God that today draws you and I together as one.

And so I now invite everyone to stand and to repeat together the story of God we tell each other each week in the affirmation of faith in our service sheets:

We believe in God our Creator,

whose word upholds all life, for God is life; whose tenderness longs for the freedom of humanity, for God is love.

We believe in Jesus Christ,

God's Son, who came to share our life and to lighten our darkness. Born among the poor, he showed us God's love. Freely accepting

death, he destroyed death. Rising again, he is the wellspring of life and hope.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,

who brings us to birth in the life of God, and floods us with strength and gladness in the struggle to be faithful.

We believe in the Church,

servant of all, bringer of good news, in whom we witness to God in the world.

We believe in eternal life.

We look for resurrection in the hope of a new world where all humanity will be one in union with God who is now, and is to come for ever.

Amen.