



## Staying in Jerusalem and keeping our hearts open

*After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.*

*'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.*

I normally listen to the radio in the morning. I like to keep up with the TV news, and I realised this week, that as I've been going about my everyday work and life here in London, my mind has been full of the voices and images from Manchester. Even that word, Manchester, sounds different today from a week ago. The fans of the 23-year-old, pop-star Ariana Grande, who has 46 million followers on Twitter, are by and large young girls and they seem to have gone to the concert on Monday in large numbers not only with their friends but with their Mums. 22 of them were murdered. Many more will live with the terror of that night for the rest of their lives.

And the signature method of terrorism, which by killing randomly is designed to terrify, has made combatants of us all, as we decide whether to join that crowd in the tube, whether to attend the match or the concert, knowing that crowds are a target in themselves. As we are urged, over and over again, by one of the mantras of our age; be alert but not alarmed.

This kind of terrorism has a way not only of devastating the lives of those who were there, but also has a way of taking over our imaginations. Even if we weren't part of it, we can start to feel very sad, even a bit hopeless. My imagination is colonised by these men of violence and I resent and resist their intrusion.

In terms of the public conversations that happen, there is a recognisable choreographed response after such appalling events like Manchester. It has become a cliché that the newsreaders will say the Prime Minister will "chair a meeting of COBRA". Every public statement from any public figure has to begin with the sentence "our thoughts and prayers (or often these days, just "our thoughts") are with the victims and their families". And especially perhaps in the febrile atmosphere of an election campaign, politicians, religious leaders, commentators, reach for the most vivid adjectives they can find: barbaric, cowardly, wicked, evil.

At the centre of this almost scripted, structured, public response is the chaos of pole-axing grief and life changing injuries for which there are no words: the tears of bewildered parents who never expected to have to bury their children; and years and years of recovery ahead for anyone who happened to be in that Arena lobby on an ordinary Monday night in May.

And then, another layer of reaction holds the actions that counter the violence. The actions of people who just respond: the homeless man who simply held an injured woman in his arms till help arrived; the taxi drivers and hotels and local people who offered free lifts, free rooms, free food to people stranded in Manchester; the woman who realised on the night that lots of young teenagers couldn't find their parents and so shepherded them to a local hotel and then put a message on Facebook for their parents to come and collect them. You may have seen the many reports this week of Sadiq Patel Imam, from the interfaith forum in Blackbury, standing beside Renee Black his 93-year-old Jewish colleague at a vigil in Bury,

Manchester, simply saying “There’s nothing to say, we have no words. We’re just in this together; we have to stay together”.

And even as she was almost inarticulate with grief, Olivia Campbell’s mother Charlotte, on the first day of knowing that her 15-year-old had been amongst those killed, also urged people to “please stay together.”

These responses have been incredibly impressive. They have inspired me. The calls for unity, for staying together, for not letting this divide us, aren’t a given; these things don’t have to be said. There are a whole lot of other responses that might be forthcoming, not least revenge, but these were the predominant responses that *were* said. Stay together. We will be united. And they are all the more impressive for it.

As Christians, we are, this Sunday, in between two of the big moments in the story of our faith. Ascension Day, which was Thursday, and Pentecost – next Sunday.

After the intense, stretching, agonising details of the execution of Jesus, the season of Easter introduces us to the mystery of resurrection and after Ascension Day, Jesus is seen no more. God withdraws from the sight of humans and this little patch of time we’re in now, is theological shorthand for reminding us that we live every day, with the intense, stretching, agonising details of events like Monday’s, and that this life, as messy and contradictory as it is, is infused with the presence of the God we cannot see.

On Ascension Day, we remembered that Jesus’s parting instruction to his followers is to, “Stay in the city. Stay in Jerusalem” until the Spirit transforms them from fearful bewilderment to open-hearted proclaimers of new life in Christ. “Stay in Jerusalem,” he said. So, the Gospel is first preached, must be preached, in a city that has blood on its hands.

And what the church has too often failed to remember is that the Gospel was first preached by those who were themselves guilty and forgiven: betrayers, deserters, deniers.

Those of us who want to live the only life we have bearing the name of Christ are invited by this gospel to recognise the unity of all humanity, to remember and recognise that our own hands are not clean of our own tribalisms and prejudices, even as we wrestle with Christ’s prayer for our unity.

And we learn to pray. We learn to live in the light that is given, bathed in the light of the God we cannot see.

And in that light, what might be asked of us is a slow, perhaps painful enlarging of our imagination, as Christ rises beyond the human cowardice and violence that pinned him to the cross.

This enlarging of our imagination is a way that the Christian story gives us strength to resist any colonising of our own imaginations by those who wish us harm. By listening to the gospel call to enlarge and deepen our own imagination of how the world could be; how we give the love we have to give; how to keep our hearts prized open when our fear and anxiety will want to close them up, by listening to this gospel, we will face down the fears in us that have not yet been cast out by love.

Gathering here today to eat and drink together, we are remembering and renewing our memory of, as we will hear later in the Eucharistic Prayer, *the same night that he was betrayed*. This action we are taking together is rooted in the chaotic and violent end to Jesus’s life. And so, it has something to say in the middle of violence and chaos; in the middle of a world brutalised by hatred and fear.

At a moment of utter crisis, Jesus broke bread. The bread is broken. Jesus’s body was broken. And this action is an action of solidarity from a God who is broken by the violence, selfishness and fear that characterises human society.

Any religion is false religion when it tries to give easy answers, or routinely choreographed responses to a newly unique tragedy like this week’s.

But the eucharist, the sharing together of bread and wine, was begun at the Last Supper, the night before Jesus died in what seemed at the time a senseless act of violence.

And so, in the light of all this, I want to invite you, not only to share bread and wine together today – but to come back on Saturday, this coming Saturday. We will be sharing an iftar, the breaking of the Ramadan fast, with Muslims from all around London.

At a time when, again, hate crime spikes after the viciousness of Monday’s nail bomb, at a time when 28 Coptic Christians were murdered on Friday in Egypt by followers of Daesh, we will open our church to our Muslim sisters and brothers to break bread together, not only to be in solidarity with them in their fast, but also as an act of defiant kindness. As an act of resistance to stereotyping or isolationism or individualism.

And then come back on Sunday and join in after the main service, at 1pm downstairs for a meeting with Housing Justice, as we discuss together how to make real what we say is our commitment to radical hospitality. If you think you could contribute anything: time, companionship, mentoring, money, even a

room, to our friends who are seeking asylum amongst us from other countries, or if you'd just like to find out more with no obligation, please come. And have some simple lunch and see what happens.

Often people say to me, "what can we do?" It's so easy to fall into a counsel of despair but there are two concrete things we can do. Next Saturday night, next Sunday lunchtime.

And if you're keen to take part in a slightly bigger act of resistance, I invite you to come to the side chapel after the service today to find out more about our proposed pilgrimage next May. In a post Brexit Europe, we want to deepen our own understanding of the European story that responded to the horror of Auschwitz by the Declaration of Human Rights, and to have as our companion the inspirational Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer who faced his own dilemma of taking part in the plot to kill Hitler.

We live in violent times. And we have choices about how we respond. There are competing stories told about who we are and what we want. There are struggles for the narrative; and so, the stories we tell as a church must be true and vivid, open hearted and strong.

The Manchester crowd challenged anyone who would listen by singing one of the songs that has come from their city in recent years. 'Don't look back in anger,' they sang.

It takes courage to do that, even to want to do that. And it will take energy and love, the kind of energy and love we celebrate here today at this Eucharist even as we call to mind the night that peace was betrayed. On the night when it seemed that violence would win, he took bread and broke it and gave it. To all of us. Amen.