

Fourth Sunday of Lent 2017 Evensong

Micah 7 & James 5

All else being equal we would this evening be unpacking Micah chapter 7 and James chapter 5 and be reflecting on how they contribute to our Lenten spiritual discipline of self-examination. But this evening all things are not equal.

As we contemplate God's presence with us all we want to do this evening is call to mind and hold on our hearts the horrendous images we have seen of this week's terror attack in Westminster. We think of seeing PC Keith Palmer strapped to a stretcher as life ebbed out of him; of people lying wounded on the carriageway of Westminster Bridge; of the sirens of ambulances and police cars as they responded; and of the bewilderment of school children and tourists and parliamentarians as the Houses of Parliament went into lock-down.

Our first response is simply to hold out those images before God with cries of inarticulate anguish. Only then do we pray: for the families of PC Palmer and the others who lost their lives; for the healing of the injured; for the protection of those who place themselves in danger for the safety of our communities; for repentance on the part of those who use indiscriminate violence; for wise and moderate leadership of minority communities; and then of course, lastly, but most chiefly, for the removal of the hatred that drives terrorism; for respect for the dignity of difference; and for understanding and friendship in which diversity can flourish.

But then, instinctive and right though these responses are, we begin to question whether we are right to allow terrorists to deflect us from our core business of working out our Lenten discipline. We feel the pain of the dilemma the members of the Scottish Parliament found themselves in as they agonised over whether to abandon their debate as news of the

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atrocities filtered through. When we see the footage of that MSP shouting that it was disgraceful to allow terrorists to achieve their goals by letting them literally halt the process of parliamentary democracy, we cannot help but feel the moral force of her argument. But we can also see that it would have been equally disgraceful for MSPs to have sat in Holyrood prattling on about another independence referendum when casualties were lying strewn across Westminster.

We feel something of that dilemma this evening, although for us it is less acute, because both of this evening's readings are about endurance in the face of injustice and civil dysfunction. They encourage us to carry on. We are encouraged not to lose hope but to carry on believing that God's kingdom will prevail. We are encouraged to carry on praying and singing hymns and psalms; to anoint the sick with oil; and to confess our sins to God and one another. We are encouraged to carry on and not to allow the core business of a faithful, worshipping community to be disrupted.

At one level this works as an act of defiance. Just as it was important that Parliament sat in session first thing on Thursday morning, and was seen to be sitting in session, so it is important that we do not allow terrorists to consume all our spiritual energies. We have business to be going about; the business of the spiritual discipline and self-examination to be able to observe a holy Lent in order to celebrate a blessed Easter. We must not be distracted from that and we must be seen not to be distracted from it.

Carrying on carrying on could also be a distraction from the sheer awfulness of what is going on around us. No matter what uncertainty or anxiety there is out there, church is always sanctuary. There is always the dependable rhythm of the church's year unfolding.

There is something to be said for carrying on as both an act of defiance and a distraction, but for us it is far more than defiance and distraction. Praying, singing, anointing, confessing, waiting on the Lord are all for

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us transformative acts. These are not just the ways we ignore or even defy terrorism: these are the ways we engage with it. Because it is through observing religious practice that we are transformed and become clothed – as Christine was saying in her all-age address this morning – in the Christian virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. And it is by being transformed to be clothed in those virtues that we in turn transform society and see the God spread.

Our domestic routines here in Bridlington may seem a world away from Isis-inspired acts of terror. But they are the conclusion of a process of radicalisation that begins on the streets and in the homes and the schools of ordinary places like Brid. Terrorism doesn't begin with civilians being indiscriminately mown down and Police Officers being stabbed to death. It begins with the suspicion, fear, anxiety and rejection that we hear spoken around us every day.

Our faith, and the gift of the Holy Spirit it offers, is the resource with which we combat this corrosive process. And we must not be distracted from cultivating it. And so we pause; and we grieve; and we pray for all who have been affected by Wednesday's attack - but not for too long.

Amen.