



11th January 2015

SERMON

Matthew 5 v 43 - 48: "Love for Enemies" - *Karen Stallard, Minister*

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

As we have listened to the news this week and heard of the terrible massacre in Paris and subsequent events we are reminded again quite how vulnerable we are to attack. It seems that it doesn't take much to trigger off the kind of attack which Paris has been subjected to, it feels very close to home and it is alarming that Muslim extremists who will so readily take another's life live next door to us.

Freedom of speech is something which the west values highly, but clearly this has been the trigger for the killings in Paris. Anti Islamic State opinions brought rise to a terrible response with an extreme message which says: "if you don't agree with us then we will kill you". A terrorising bully tactic to silence and control those who might be different or oppose the regime.

We condemn the murders, we are confused and angry not knowing how a human being can do such a terrible act. We do not understand the mind of the terrorist who is capable of killing people in cold blood, killing normal citizens of Paris. We see these terrorists as barbaric, uncontrollable animals who need to be caught and stopped. We have no inclination to get to know them, we just want to get rid of them and the threat which they carry, we want them to go away.

As Christians it is important to think about how we might respond to these terrible incidents. I think it is easy to just see this as a black and white, open and shut case of bad Islamic extremists killing good westerners, we want to see it that way because we too are westerners and we like to think that we are good. The trouble is with this black and white version of the story - the bad extremist murders the good westerner, is exactly the same as the story the extremists buy into they just tell it the other way round: The bad Westerner and the good Muslim.



Splitting good and bad like this and simplifying what is actually quite complex allows us to justify killing and murder - They are all bad therefore it is ok to exterminate them - this is what the men who went into that office in Paris on the 7th January had done, the people they killed in their mind were all bad, they had turned into Monsters for the extremists and so it was ok to kill them, in fact the bad monsters are so threatening to them that it is essential to kill them.

As soon as we turn someone into a monster and forget to remember that they too are a human beings just like us, then we become so frightened of them that we want to kill them. You and I may not literally kill them, but in our minds we do because we so desperately want them out of our lives, we will fantasise about their demise and think cruel thoughts about them, poke fun at them, ridicule them to try and deflate their hold over us. And if we have been trained to kill then we may just take a gun and shoot them in the heart, the monster is dead and we are freed from our terror of them.

Jesus says Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. The terrorist activity in Northern Ireland calmed down, not by the extermination of the 'Bad' and the victory of the 'Good' but because there were people who were willing to see the other side as not just bad, and there were people who no longer wanted to play the 'good' 'bad' game and so they stopped. Things became grey, cloudy and the clarity of the black and white thinking was gone, the drive to kill the monster was slowed down and the monster turned back into a human being again. The Protestants became human and the Catholics became human

My fear for France and the rest of Europe and indeed for us here in the UK is that we will play the good bad game, we will join in with the Islamic extremists and become black and white in our thinking, we will split ourselves into us goodies and them baddies, and we will become frightened of the monstrous enemy. Once this fear takes over then the game is in full play and as with the childhood game of cowboys and Indians there is only ever one outcome, the good wins and the bad dies. A precious life is lost. I hope as a nation we will not be childlike in our response to these killings, I hope we will be able to see past bullying terrorist and look at a frightened Muslim and have some compassion.

We need to show more than tolerance towards our Muslim neighbours, we need to show love, Many of our Muslim neighbours are not terrorists but a few are, we should show love to all. Ridiculing Islam, ridiculing the leaders of the Islamic state is not showing love, it is sadly playing a dangerous game with people who can only see things in a black and white way. It is a fool who teases an angry man with a gun, it is a wise man who shows kindness.



Jesus says be like your Father in heaven - he makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. Can you imagine if God became selective on whom he sends rain? I was in Paris a number of years ago and I was sitting next to another English couple in a restaurant, an older couple who were on holiday. They spoke to me and my friend and mentioned that they were worried about their son who was battling with cancer, this was the year following the Tsunami which had swept across Sri Lanka killing thousands. We talked about the Tsunami - and the woman quite without hesitation said that she thought the Tsunami was God's way of culling the population, getting rid of the unwanted. I had to stop myself from asking if she also thought that cancer was God's way of culling the world's population as well.

Clearly this woman had not encountered the God that Jesus was talking about, the God that Jesus is talking about gives life to both the good and the bad, the righteous and the unrighteous. The God that Jesus talks about doesn't destroy the bad but gives the bad sunlight and rain and life, perhaps this is a God who hopes that the bad will turn good if given life and the unrighteous will become righteous if treated equally. We are to be like this God that Jesus talks about, we are not to be like the god the woman in Paris was talking about. We are to love both people who are good to us, and also people who are bad to us. If only the Islamic extremists understood the God that they worshipped then they too would learn how to treat equally those who are good and those who are evil in their eyes, they would not need to kill and destroy.

It is easy to love those who love us so where is the reward? But to love your enemy, enough to stop yourself from retaliating may bring the greatest reward of peace and reconciliation. There is a lot of hatred at the moment towards the Muslim extremists and we are right to be greatly distressed and angry over the attacks which have happen, not just in Paris but across the western world. But if we are not able to overcome our hatred then we will become blind with rage and hit out against the enemy, we will enter the game again and the terror will continue.

Islamist extremists are human beings, they have been brought up in a controlling, judgemental world, they are not allowed freedom of speech, they are not allowed to think for themselves. They are full of anger and hatred at those who they believe have suppressed them. They are unable to see the evil within their regime, that is too difficult for them and so they transfer the evil onto the rest of the world. They are trapped in a dangerous game where not only do others die, but many of them die as well, no one wins. We cannot expect these men and women to be able to see the grey, they only see black and white, they will need a lot of help to be able to break free from the black and white mind set they have been conditioned in. We must have compassion for them and we must pray for them they are deeply wounded and defended people, how sad that a life can be so restricted in this way.



But also we need to see the extremist within ourselves, we also have the capacity to murder and kill that which we believe to be evil. We need to treat ourselves with love and respect in order to calm down our extremist self and to help us to see the complexities and not to just be childlike in our judgement of what is right and wrong. We are to love those who are not our friends or our family or our race or our gender, we are to love those who are different from us, and to love those who we claim to be so different.

So what does this love look like? Perhaps it begins with what comes out of our mouths, how we talk about these terrorists, then perhaps it is how we relate to the wider Muslim population, how we view our Muslim neighbours, how we show respect towards their faith and their customs. Perhaps it is overcoming our fear of the terrorists, if a spider is frightening we want to squash it, if we are not frightened of it then we leave it be or perhaps gently remove it to a safe place. If we are able to overcome our fear of the enemy then all sorts of creative options open out to us to try and relate to them.

So let me encourage you to really think this week about how you discuss these terrorist attacks, the language you use about the extremists, perhaps remind yourself that the world must be a very dangerous place to these terrorists in order for them to be doing what they are doing, how might you make this world a little less dangerous.