

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO THE DESTRUCTION OF TERROR

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Friday 15 March 2019; Christchurch experiences a severe and ghastly jolt that some would suggest is greater than the destructive 2010 and 2011 earthquakes.

This time it is not an act of nature that breaks Christchurch, it is an act of one man. This time it is a heavily-armed terrorist so blinded by hate that he deliberately chooses to go on a brutal, belligerent rampage to murder and destroy the lives of those he believes have robbed him of his freedom.

For 21 horror-filled minutes he unleashes the bitter evil in his heart and the aftermath is 50 dead and many wounded and maimed. Finally, brave police officers seize him and stop him, but the damage is done.

First responders see a river of blood. It was described as a war-zone. Death is everywhere. Screaming, crying, trembling and confused the wounded are transported to hospitals. As the news spreads, the city of fears becomes a city of tears.

Paradise Lost

For many New Zealanders, at that moment our paradise was taken, innocence was lost, and we know we will never be the same again. As a fractured nation, we grieve with those who have been most affected by this act of terror. Our hearts have connected with these people, these families. We feel their pain, we've raged within and we've poured out our sympathies as we've been able.

As a friend of mine said:

"The response to the evil has been overwhelming and spontaneous and, in many ways, quite different to the earthquake response. Then, we all were affected personally, now the hurt has come to a small, tight-knit community that most were happy to leave alone. Their anguish has shown they bleed like us—and even more so, as refugees and recent immigrants. There is a quiet atmosphere and a hollow feeling in most people which is unusual."

The Christchurch earthquake rocked property and possessions, but this unprecedented, depraved quake has rocked the very moral core and emotions of almost every New Zealander. We were shaken by malicious evil. This is raw, this is real, and I've felt like the fabric of my soul has been torn.

In 1996, Australia had Port Arthur. In 1999, America had Columbine. In 2005, London had terrorists attack. In 2015, Paris faced terror. In 2011, Norway was confronted by a terror attack motivated by White Supremacy... and now New Zealand wrestles with the same manifestation of hatred, anger and insanity that has surfaced in our world. Again, the world weeps and asks: How and why do people commit such extreme, violent acts against others?

The analysts now come out and will discuss and devour what has happened for years to come. Already, White Supremacy, radicalisation, racism, anti-social behaviour and exposure to video games have been touted as the cause of this perpetrator's actions.

Like every New Zealander, I want justice for the victims and pray that this nation can return to civility. I am a New Zealander through and through and I want the best for this great country of ours. However, I am also a realist and know that this country will never be the same again. Changes will come to gun laws, domestic security, tolerance, sports, social gatherings and many other implications will be felt.

I am also a Christian and the only way I can make sense of this event is to look through the lens of Scripture. In uncertain times like these, I pour through the Bible's insightful pages in order to try and make sense of this outrage and to know how to respond.

How does a Christian respond?

1. We must know what we believe

This is not the time to examine other faiths. Now is the time to be assured that what you believe and how you behave is truth personified. Reaffirming your belief is not to show arrogance, it is to confirm your confidence in Jesus Christ your Saviour (Jude 24).

If we understand that "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked" (Jeremiah 17:9) we come close to grasping how this bad man's life became corrupted. His free-will was immoral and convinced him to act in the most destructive way. His belief system was warped and malicious. He's not the first to reveal obnoxious and perverse thinking and sadly, he won't be the last.

Our God knows exactly what has happened. We must believe that our Sovereign God will ultimately bring justice to this world. Every person will stand before Christ the Judge one day (2 Corinthians 5:10).

In order that you can help others, you must believe that perfect love drives out all fears (1 John 4:18). Because of God's great love for you, nothing can separate you from God's love (Romans 8:38-39). Your Saviour will keep you safe with the double grip of his and the Father's hand (John 10:28-29).

Now is the time to stop quoting Scripture and start living out God's Word. This is a time when you may be the only Bible that people read. So, walk in quiet confidence as you minister to others.

Although this tragic event should not be used to leverage the gospel, if you are asked what you believe and how you are coping, this is the right occasion to "give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15).

2. We must practice what we believe

"Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27).

“Look out for the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4).

“Let your gentleness be evident to all” (Philippians 4:5).

“I can do everything through Him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:13).

Respond to your neighbours like the good Samaritan did (Luke 10:25-37).

“[God] comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble” (2 Corinthians 1:4).

Now would be a good time to visit those in your neighbourhood who live alone. In the days that followed this terrible incident, we visited our neighbours. We found their doors wide open and despite the sadness, they wanted to talk about it. They needed someone to unburden their worries. They needed someone to listen, to cry with and to receive hope from another human. Some needed hugs, others just needed our presence.

It may be time to gather your own family around to remind them of the hope you have within. Don't hide your light under the bed (Luke 8:16). Now is the time to shine your light among men.

3. We must not overreact

Islamophobia, xenophobia, racism, tolerance, bullying, moral decline, gender equality and the dangers of social media are issues that divide us and are already being discussed. That dialogue needs to continue with clear heads and in the light of day. In these dark days, it's easy to be blinded with disgust, anger and, ironically, hate others who disagree with us.

Already, salt has been poured on this open wound as some have tried to use these slayings as a launchpad for other agendas. Emotions run high and social media can launch thousands of opinions. Different agenda will arise here that shouldn't yet be on the table. They are distractions from the real issues and should be quite rightly set aside.

Christians will do well to be very guarded about sharing over-the-top opinions. Let's not be seduced by the rhetoric and diverted away from our priority to “Love the Lord our God with all our heart and to love your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39). King Solomon said it well, “Do you see someone who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than them” (Proverbs 29:20).

There is much talk about solidarity for Christchurch and its people. Empathetic messages from around the world are saying we stand in solidarity with you. I understand the sentiment. As New Zealanders that care, we want to connect with this hurting community and say that as one we reject evil and choose to have the common good of all people.

However, although placing flowers and attending vigils and prayer meetings have their place, the best way forward is for us to stand as one in unity. This means we are going to have to agree on common values and uphold them. We need to practice “from dissension, envy, hate, and corruption guard our state...”

Unity means 'Together works Better'. Unity means, as a body, with Christ as our Head, we do things together: Loving, caring, touching, healing hearts and binding wounds (Job. 5:18). When we move together in unity the Lord will command the blessings (Ps. 133:1,3). When we are in "...complete unity, Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:23).

4. We must set an example

What happened in two mosques on Friday 15 March will impact us for many years to come. The wound may heal in time, but a scar will remain. Our politicians will need to rise above themselves to be better leaders. They need to lead with dignity, respect and acceptance of their fellow-man. Their example is essential to how this nation heals.

Our churches will also need a reset. If we are to bring healing and salvation to a nation, our criticisms and outbursts against other Christians have to stop. Our example is critical because if we want to draw all men and women, boys and girls to Christ, we will need to be genuine up-lifters of God's name and his purposes (John 12:32).

Our Lord understands our despondency. He knows we are disturbed with what has happened. He hears our cries for peace. We are not alone. He wants to comfort us and is already working in the lives of many people. His love for us and this country is too great to ever abandon. Our burden is carried and what a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! We need to act in gratitude on our knees (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

For now, we mourn. We lament and we cry. Our collective tears cry out to heaven, "Please Lord, never again." In the days ahead, as our tears dry up and we begin to rise again, may the lessons we learn from this heartbreaking tragedy mean we press on and show our families, friends, neighbourhoods and communities that we are a people of hope.

We've read the last chapter of the Bible—we know how it all ends. "Weeping may remain for a night but rejoicing comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:5).