

Beyond belief

It's always such a joy to prepare a sermon for Easter Sunday. Easter, after all, is the pivot around which our entire faith revolves. Here a story which began way back in the mists of time and which we trace through the Holy Scriptures comes to a climax. Here the Christian faith comes to a focus, at a tomb outside Jerusalem with the rock that had sealed it a few hours before now sitting idly by. And Easter Sunday therefore affords an opportunity to let rip – in song and in word and in action at the table of the risen Lord. It's a great celebration.

This year, however, it's somewhat different. This year the events of the world intrude upon our worship for we cannot shut the door and keep them out. This year Holy Week, this sacred week in the Christian year, was the occasion for an act of unspeakable evil and brutality whose shockwaves spread far beyond the city of Brussels where it took place. Perhaps there is something almost appropriate about that timing. After all, the story of Holy Week is one of evil and violence. It's about the murder of the innocent. The story of the first Holy Week is one that exposes to us the darkness of the world that we inhabit. And it's the same darkness that we saw on display in Brussels last week.

I'd like to begin by thinking for a while of what we learnt about evil last week. What do these events teach us? And I guess the first thing that we notice is the way that evil often breaks in, unexpectedly, out of nowhere, shocking us. When people describe the horrors of events like last Tuesday they often say things like, 'people were just going about their ordinary business'. Of course in some ways outrages like this are not entirely unexpected. We know all about the terrorist threat. Our security services warn us that we are on high alert, that an attack may come at any time. And tragically in other parts of the world – in Iraq, in Syria – suicide bombs are almost commonplace. We hear reports of 50 people being blown apart in Baghdad and it hardly makes the news, so predictable has it become. Yet, when it happens to us or near us there is always that shock of the unexpected. Indeed that is what is so terrifying – the way the normal, the routine, the everyday is suddenly invaded by the horror.

Right back in the early chapters of the Bible, in the account of the first murder, when Cain slew his brother Abel, Cain is warned before his action that 'sin is crouching at your door.' It's a striking image. Evil there is depicted like a beast waiting to spring, poised to burst through the door. And to people last

Tuesday queuing at the airport or travelling on the Metro it must have seemed like that, when normality was suddenly breached by death and destruction. Just a few Sundays ago people in Scotland commemorated 20 years since the Dunblane massacre, when a gunman murdered sixteen children and a teacher. I always remember what the head teacher said the day after the killings: 'evil visited us yesterday, and we don't know why.' That's how it is. The beast sprang, plundering routine, shattering normality – unpredictable, but also inexplicable. We don't know why.

That brings us to the second thing about the evil displayed last Tuesday. It's inexplicable, we simply cannot understand it. I know that at one level we know why it happened. We know something about the mind-set of so-called Islamic State and why they do what they do, but nevertheless it still leaves us baffled. How can human beings do that to one another? It's irrational, it doesn't make any sense, it defies comprehension. It's always the same when the face of evil is revealed – think of the holocaust. How could it happen? How did ordinary people with spouses and children do such things? It's incomprehensible. Again, the events in Brussels this Holy Week happened to coincide with the verdict and sentencing of Radovan Karadzic for genocide and crimes against humanity in the Balkans in the 1990s, including the massacre of over 7000 Muslim men and boys executed by his forces. How do we make sense of that? In the Bible Paul, writing about the struggle against evil and sin declares that 'we are not struggling against enemies of flesh and blood' - in other words there is something transcendent about evil, something that surpasses flesh and blood and what human minds can fathom. It comes from beyond. And it is beyond belief.

Well, so much for evil and its features. It breaks in, unexpected and disruptive, and it's incomprehensible – beyond belief. The great thing, however, is that exactly the same things could be said of Jesus' resurrection from the grave. Exactly the same things could be said of the events the we celebrate this morning, for Jesus' resurrection matches and trumps evil at every turn. So, the resurrection breaks in unexpectedly, shattering routine and normality. Just think of those women going to the tomb, in the early dawn. For them this was what you did when death came knocking at your door, snatching a loved one from you. This was the routine. These were the protocols. You took spices and anointed the body. Maybe they'd done that before with other loved ones – life expectancy was low in those days, after all, and it's unlikely that

they'd got that far in life without going through all this before. Maybe they were accustomed to that sad pilgrimage to the grave with their spices. Maybe for some of them it was a well-worn path. Only this time they were confounded by the unexpected and the unforeseen – we read that 'they found the stone rolled away from the tomb'. This is not routine. If there is one thing that is routine in this unpredictable, uncertain world it is that the dead stay dead. The road into the tomb is a one-way street. So no wonder it says that these women were 'perplexed' – I guess that's an understatement: in other gospels we are told that they were terrified! Nothing had prepared them for this. Sure, the angel reminds them that Jesus had told them that he would be handed over and crucified and on the third day would rise again but they never thought it would actually happen – they had no precedent to think that it might! But now resurrection invades their familiar world. Again, in other gospels we are told that there was an earthquake because that can happen when resurrection bursts in. Evil and bombers do not have a monopoly on earth-shattering disarray.

And of course, like evil, resurrection is utterly inexplicable. We cannot fathom with our minds how this might happen. It makes no sense. No wonder the male disciples who they tell simply don't believe the women. Those disciples had seen what the Romans had done to Jesus. They had witnessed the awful torture of crucifixion. They had seen his limp and broken and bloodied body. No one comes back from that. We read that the women's words 'seemed to them like an idle tale, and they did not believe them.' It's interesting that the original Greek word there for 'idle tales' is 'leros', a strong word from which we get our word 'delirious'. It referred to the ravings of the fevered and the very sick who had lost all hold upon reality. That was the verdict of the disciples on the women's claim. Delirious. Beyond belief.

That is the glory and the wonder of the resurrection. It's unbelievable. We cannot grasp, fathom or comprehend it. I'm a little mystified by scientists who tell me that the resurrection is unbelievable for such things cannot happen. Well, of course it's unbelievable to our little limited minds. Of course it cannot happen. But we are dealing with God here. And if God is real then reality becomes endlessly more mysterious and rich and glorious. Not even the dead can be trusted to stay dead – and all bets are off.

Evil: it breaks in and shocks and disorients us, shattering our familiar, mundane world. And it's inexplicable – beyond belief. But on this Easter Sunday we celebrate good news. Evil is just a pale parody of the good and of

resurrection. New resurrection life breaks in too, unexpectedly, turning our world upside down. Sometimes it comes with an earthquake and sometimes it comes as a whisper but it comes from beyond, from God's restless, surging freedom. We cannot control it or organise it or get a handle on it. We can only celebrate it and rejoice in it when and where we discern it. And listen. It's crouching at the door, waiting to strike, only unlike evil it is waiting to bless us to do us good, to make us new. This resurrection life comes to us in Jesus, our risen Lord, waiting at the door of your life, poised to enter. And if you find that unbelievable, well of course it is. It is well beyond belief and certainly the disciples thought so. But it's true, as they were soon to discover. I pray that you too may find it to be true. Amen.

Glorious and gracious God,
Life giving, death defying, Jesus raising God,
we praise and bless your holy name.
Today we join with the church throughout the centuries in proclaiming that
Jesus Christ,
who suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead and was buried,
rose again on the third day.
Today we join with the women who went to the tomb
with their spices, expecting to embalm Jesus' body.
Today we join with that little group of disciples
who head the news that Jesus' tomb was empty
and that he had risen as he said he would.
O God forgive us that, like them, we have not believed;

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forgive us that, like them, we have rejected resurrection;
forgive us that, like them, we have preferred the old world
where the dead stay dead.

O God for all our faithlessness,
for all our betrayals of the truth,
we pray for forgiveness

O God, the first disciples unbelief as not the last word
for you raised them up and made them new,
and transformed them into your witnesses to the world.
Do the same to us, we pray.

Assure us of your forgiving love,
Send us your Spirit
and raise us up to new, resurrection life.

We pray in the name of Jesus, the risen one. Amen.

O gracious God,
We pray today for our world,
one in which evil is on the loose,
striking unexpectedly and leaving devastated lives.

We pray today for the people of Brussels,
recovering from these attacks,
for the injured and the bereaved.

And we pray for our sister church there,
St Andrew's, that you would guard and protect them,
and bless their witness to that community.

We pray for security forces there and elsewhere
as they seek to defend us.

And we pray for those who perpetrate such things,

that you would touch their consciences
and help them to rediscover their humanity
and to turn from such evil ways...
O God, on this Easter Sunday, bless your church.
Help us in our proclamation of our risen Lord.
May the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the grave
raise us up to new life and inspire our witness.
And bless the life and witness of this church here.
Bless our community around these doors.
We pray for the life of our city,
praying for it's peace and prosperity and for its safety...
And God, as we come to this table,
we bring with us the things that are on our hearts and minds:
the joys and sorrows of our lives.
In a moment of silence we offer to you
our particular needs and concerns...
And we pray all these things in the name of Jesus,
Our risen Lord and Saviour. Amen.