

The Lord's Prayer And Terrorism

I wrote this talk because when planning our sermon series on the Lord's Prayer, I noticed that 11th September 2016 fell on a Sunday. I do not have any depth of specialist knowledge, but I have read four books over the past year on terrorism, as a matter of continuing ministerial development. Reading about terrorism is not simply a help in understanding one of the most prominent features of our day, but also helps us reflect on ministry in general: essentially it is about people and relationships. When I originally gave this talk on 4th September, it was a bit of a jumble. I have now rewritten it following the structure of the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father.

When we say the Lord's Prayer, we realise there is more that unites us than divides us. We don't call God "our" Father because we think he belongs to us; there is nothing proprietorial about the Lord's prayer. You might think that sets us apart from terrorists, as if "they think they have God on their side, but we are much more humble." Of course that would be a delusion. The phrase "Our Father" is first and foremost *inclusive*. It reminds us of our commonality. It pulls us away from "us and them". Without doubt, there were moments in Jesus' ministry when he delineated "us and them", but the greatest and most radical accent was on inclusion.

Terrorism is largely defined by the rhetoric on both sides> The problem with rhetoric is that we are always inclined to believe our own and then be squeezed into living according to the limited choices it offers us. When we say, "Our Father..." We are coming before God who is bigger than us, and who knows the whole picture. So in God's presence, we can't simply hold on to our own rhetoric. We have to accept that God will call us to witness a bigger picture. Whenever we say the Lord's prayer, there is always the implication that we are going to have to change.

British journalist, Peter Taylor focuses mostly on the IRA and Al Qaeda in his book "Talking to Terrorists". In it he exposes the inaccuracies and unhelpfulness of our rhetoric. Rhetoric is not the same as

truth. We use it to gain advantage and control. In the case of terrorism, it is all about having the power to define what is going on.

The IRA are a case in point. The British called them terrorists as a deliberate way of managing the situation. The IRA never regarded themselves as terrorists and took exception to those who described them as such. So this raises the whole issue of how you frame terrorists – and who has the right to define them. The IRA described their “armed struggle” as a legitimate way to achieve what could not be done by political means. They were an army at war. We called them terrorists because it delegitimised them. To label a group “terrorist” is a way of containing them, demonising them, suggesting that they are of a different order to us. They’re not playing by the rules. They could set off a bomb apparently out of nowhere causing death and terror to civilians. Yet we don’t consider WW2 bombing by the Luftwaffe, RAF, or USAF terrorism, even though they also deliberately killed civilians in an attempt to get the opposition to submit. That was “war”.

Hallowed Be Your Name

“Hallowed be your name” is a phrase that centres us spiritually. It is the reminder that God is God – holy and other. It’s a phrase that confirms us in our humanity and settles us in humility. In our pious, self-absorbed moments, we might add, “not like those terrorists over there, who are crazed and manic.”

When Peter Taylor turns to Al Qaeda he considers the question of who becomes a terrorist. One of the most consistent answers is that it is ordinary people, whose families knew nothing of what was going on, and who most of the people around them say they would be the last person expected to plant a bomb. Until they are faced with the evidence – and sometime even after it – the closest family members of a bomber typically say “it is impossible that my son could do this.”

This raises the question of brainwashing. Where and how did it happen? Should we be wary of madrassas on every English street corner? Scott Attran shows that many westerners who join Al Qaeda or IS did not have a strong Muslim teaching growing up. Their families may have been observant in the general sense, but were often quite nominal in their practice. Muslim equivalents of Sunday Schools do

not increase the likelihood of terrorism. In fact, Muslim religious organisations have been more effective than any others in persuading people to defect from terrorist commitments. Research shows that Muslim religious education has been shown to deter people from terrorism far more than it has ever encouraged them.

Once again, it is our commonality with terrorists that comes to the fore. “They” are ordinary people like us. This doesn’t mean they are exactly the same as us. Terrorism can be defined. Louise Richardson, currently Vice Chancellor of Oxford University, in her outstanding book “What Terrorists Want” defines seven identifying factors of terrorism. But she also goes on to say that terrorism has been practiced by the right wing, the left, by atheists, agnostics, religious people, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus; their objectives range from bringing about the apocalypse in Japan to, Maoist revolution in Peru and the end of capitalism in Europe and so on. Terrorists are not insane. Their primary shared characteristic, she says, is their normalcy.

Your Kingdom Come

“Your Kingdom Come” is essentially a prayer for justice. Whenever we pray it, therefore, we are closer than ever to the mind of the terrorist. Fighting a war for which you have volunteered – especially an international one – is about joining a cause. It is a cause to put things right. And this is what we also commit ourselves to when we pray “your Kingdom come.”

Scott Attran in his book “Talking to the Enemy – Religion, Brotherhood, and the (un)making of Terrorists” says the following:

“Especially for young men, mortal combat in a great cause provides the ultimate adventure and glory to gain maximum esteem in the eyes of many and most dearly, in the hearts of their peers. By identifying their devotion with the greater defence and salvation of humanity, they commit themselves to a path that allows mass killing for what they think is a massive good... It is in groups that they find the camaraderie of a cause, however admirable or abhorrent, and the courage and commitment that come from belonging to something larger.

Terrorists, generally do not commit terrorism because they are extraordinarily vengeful or uncaring, poor or uneducated, humiliated or lacking in self-esteem, school as children in radical religion or brainwashed, criminally minded or suicidal, or sex-starved for virgins in heaven. Terrorists for the most part, are not nihilist but extreme moralists – altruists fastened to a hope gone haywire.”

What then are the motives of a terrorist? In many cases they are good, moral motives. Of course there are many who are simply criminals and thugs, and some movements contain more of these than others. For example, this certainly seems to be the case with Boko Haram, and to a large extent IS, in contrast to, for example Al Qaeda. But these are simply my personal impressions.

Typically, the person who joins a terrorist cause does so for reasons of morality and justice. Most often, the terrorist isn't waging this war for their own sake – they are seeking justice on behalf of someone else. Even if you take the example of Palestine, where it might be thought the people are fighting for their own cause, they actually feel fighting because they have witnessed the injustice caused to their people. So there's a sense of solidarity with the oppressed. And that's why a member of Al Qaeda or Isil can “we are doing this because of what you do to Palestine” even if they or you have never been to Palestine. It's about solidarity.

In the Lord's prayer, we pray for God's kingdom to come and this too is a prayer for justice. Sometimes we pray it for ourselves; most often, perhaps, we pray it for others. The question is, “How do we play our part in bringing that kingdom in?” Most Christians (but not all) would say acts of terror are not acceptable methods. However, such an outlook wouldn't have been shared by Samson in Judges 15, who wrought revenge on the Philistines by catching three hundred foxes, tying their tails together, setting them alight and releasing them into the enemy's corn fields: Targeted terrorist activity!

On Earth as in Heaven

This short phrase is a prayer for peace, order and the restoration of harmony. But if we are working for peace, then we need to talk. Earlier, I discussed the governmental strategy of naming in order to take and retain the upper hand. If I can define “them” as “other” then I can galvanise support from my own in

opposing them. But one of the problems with this strategy is that once you've said that "they" are of a different order to "us", it's a short step to saying: "we can't talk to them." And then you've painted yourself into a corner. How can you find peace?

Peter Taylor clearly documents in his book that in spite of the rhetoric, peace eventually came to Northern Ireland because people were talking to each other behind the scenes even when publicly they declared that talks were impossible. I will have more to say on the question of peace and reconciliation under the phrase on forgiveness.

Give Us Today Our Daily Bread

Give us Today our Daily Bread can mean a whole range of things. At one end of a spectrum, it can be said by people who have plenty and more, as a way of expressing our actual daily dependency on God. In this way we relativise the significance of all the things we have and are able to be more generous with them. At the other end of that same spectrum, it may be said by people who are absolutely on the breadline, subsisting day to day, facing desperation perhaps. If we take that extreme from the arena physical hunger, we can also apply it to desperation of other sorts: our mental state, our relationships, our work. The prayer may be paraphrased "Lord, help me get through this day."

Once again, we gain insight into the terrorist mind. Discounting the criminal elements which obviously latch on to terrorist causes, basic terrorist philosophy is that violence is resorted to because nothing else appears to work. In the case of the IRA, their "armed struggle" was deemed a necessary evil because the political process was a closed book. Terrorists see the situation as desperate.

Jurgen Todenhöfer was the first Western journalist to travel into IS and come out alive. His book, "My Journey Into the Heart of Terror – Ten Days in the Islamic State" is a far less gripping read than the title suggests. However, it does confirm already known insights some with verbatim reports. One of these is that terrorists, who we are taught to fear so greatly, actually consider themselves to be the far weaker of two sides in a war. They are the victims – or fighting on behalf of the victims. They are the ones who have "no recourse but to do this." One of the fighters asked Todenhöfer, "Have you ever considered what must

go through a suicide bomber's mind just before he blows himself up?" "Stop attacking us and humiliating us. Clear off back to your own countries. Then al-Qaeda will disappear on its own." So although we see *them* as making attacks, *they* consistently see the West as the aggressor.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us that spirituality which trusts God, even in times of desperation. It is not a "do nothing" spirituality, but it is certainly a guard against allowing our desperation to lead to lying, theft or murder, for example. By saying "Give us today our daily bread", Jesus is teaching us to continually look to God in our desperation. Terrorism uses the rhetoric of God, but, more than any other phenomenon, is characterised precisely by "taking matters into our own hands." This is the terrorist imperative: "We *have* to act; we *have* to get a response; we *must* make the world sit up and take notice of us. In this way, the Lord's Prayer reveals the spiritual weakness of terrorist outlook. Essentially, although they use the rhetoric of God's provision for them, they are actually supplying too much of the answer by themselves.

Nevertheless, understanding the desperation of terrorism should make us ask why they feel so desperate. What is the hunger? What is the problem? Can we help solve it, and if so, what must we do? It's not enough to say that our role is simply to contain or defeat terrorism. When we see desperate people starving in a famine, we don't say to ourselves, "How can we contain this fact so that it doesn't affect us?" We ask, "How can we ameliorate their desperation?" When our children are raging, we don't simply send them to their rooms to calm down; we talk with them to find out what is wrong.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

If terrorists so clearly seem themselves, or the people for whom they fight, as victims, then we on the other side need to ask ourselves, "What have we done wrong? When Tony Blair said in 2006, "This terrorism isn't our fault. We didn't cause it," he was surely very wrong. Jesus tells us that before we get fixated on how much we have to forgive all the wrongs that have been done to us, we need to ask forgiveness for the wrongs we have committed. We cannot persist in the idea that we in the West are the only victims.

In his book Peter Taylor talks to Hanif Kadir, who was running the Active Change Foundation in Waltham Forest. He asks him why he went to join up with a terrorist organisation. “My intention was to help innocent civilians and the victims caught in the conflict, but also to get involved in the *jihad* because of seeing Western fighters dropping bombs on innocent civilians.” So there are actions for which the West needs to ask forgiveness. The tipping point for Hanif was seeing the effects of Western foreign policy. He said, “if Western foreign policy changed it would make a huge difference.” Before 9/11, Al Qaeda were largely unwelcome guests in Afghanistan. However, Western reactions those attacks – particularly the immediate bombing, had the effect of galvanising disparate parties, strengthening popular support, and causing much more terrorism than they have solved.

Western rhetoric and “the war on terror” added to this by aligning terrorism with Islam. The American government chose not to see 9/11 as an attack on American policies. For rhetorical purposes (ie purposes of power and control), they chose to see it as, in President Bush’s words, “because they despise our freedom and our way of life.” This was totally without basis in fact. But as a result, Louise Richardson says, “In October 2001, 28% of Americans thought they were at war with Islam. A year later, that number had grown to 35%.”

Like Tony Blair, George Bush claimed, “No act of ours invited the rage of the killers – and no concession, bribe or act of appeasement would change or limit their plans for murder.” In saying this, he delegitimised any effort to engage. Yet in the petition on forgiveness, Jesus explicitly commands us to engage. In statements over the years, Osama bin Laden repeated claimed, “A million innocent children are dying as we speak, killed in Iraq without any guilt.” The West poured ridicule on this assertion – what has this got to do with us? How are we to blame? But the fact is that UN sanctions did causes the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children. A UNICEF report in 1999 showed that 500,000 children under 5 died in Iraq, largely as a result of Western sanctions. The Lancet reported a doubling in infant mortality between 1984 and 1989, and a nearly three-fold increase in under-5 mortality. The Lord’s prayer does not teach us to protest our innocence. It teaches us to seek forgiveness.

So the imperative is with the leaders of the far more powerful - but terrorised - nations to steady the ship. Unfortunately, they rarely do. Inflammatory responses do not make for peace. After the assassination of President McKinley by an anarchist in 1901, his successor Roosevelt said, “When compared to the suppression of anarchy, every other question sinks into insignificance. The anarchist is the enemy of humanity; the enemy of all mankind; and his is a deeper degree of criminality than any other.” Imagine if he had said, for example, “hunger is the enemy of humanity – let’s not worry about these few anarchists.”

As a matter of fact, we can have a very good idea of what would have happened. In 2003, Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, was proven to be a hotbed of support for Al Qaeda. When the Sari night club was bombed, killing 202 people, one of the accused said that he did it because he “hated Americans.” In December 2004 Indonesia was devastated by the Boxing Day Tsunami. The USA initially offered \$35m in assistance, quickly increasing it tenfold, and by the February, President Bush had pledged \$950m. A public opinion poll found that 79% of Indonesians had a more favourable view of the United States as a result of these relief efforts. Those who expressed a definite favourable view of the United States rose from 15% in 2003 to 38% in 2005. During the same period, Indonesian public confidence in bin Laden as a world leader fell during the same period from 58% to 35%. Policy makes a difference.

Earlier I mentioned Hanif Kadir who told Peter Taylor why he had joined a terrorist cause. As it turned out, when he saw the reality of what *jihad* involved, he thought better of it, returned home, and gave his energies to propagating the opposite message. Repentance is only possible where forgiveness and reconciliation are on the table, so recent UK policy to criminalise anyone who returns is deeply flawed. The number of potential fighters who return before starting is surprisingly high. So just as we need to challenge the idea of “not talking to terrorists” we also need to challenge the idea of simply criminalising people who go to join their cause – they may do a power of good if they were allowed to return.

In the Lord’s prayer we say, “Forgive us our sins...” It’s an acceptance that we are responsible for our actions. It applies to Western governments and of course, to the bombers, or those who control them.

Both sides are thriving on the provocation of the other. But instead, we need to accept responsibility for our actions and provocations, rather than simply justifying ourselves.

Lead Us Not Into Temptation

So what temptations do we face? One of the points I have repeatedly made is about the effects of rhetoric – on both sides. So one of our greatest temptations is to believe the rhetoric. Peter Taylor, however, says “Recognising reality is a prerequisite for ending conflict.” And reality is bigger than our own rhetoric. Rhetoric and managed truth always closes down our perspective. But prayer always calls us to look for the bigger picture. We have to learn to hold several apparently contradictory things together at the same time. One of the early go-betweens in the search for peace in Northern Ireland, Michael Oatley, said, “I’d come to understand that the continuation of a violent campaign was not inconsistent with the IRA’s willingness to consider political options.” In other words, there could be a bigger picture than the rhetoric.

Louise Richardson says that one of the “three Rs” that terrorists want is Reaction. They are seeking to make a point. All the more reason to be very careful in how we react. All the more reason not to slip into the easy vote-winning responses of merciless pursuit.

Ultimately, the temptation to respond in an excessive retaliatory way is the temptation not to trust God. And trust is written through every line of the Lord’s Prayer. Trusting God helps us trust other people, and trusting other people helps build peace. Terror is designed to provoke illogical reactions. That is how it works. Governments, above all, need to resist the temptation for stoke this fire. The three thousand casualties of 9/11 was a huge figure, but in the same year, the USA experience 30,000 suicides, 16,000 homicides, 15,000 deaths by falls, and there are six times as many people killed by drunk driving every year than were killed in the 9/11 bombings. So why didn’t George Bush proclaim a “war on alcohol?” The answer is partly because previous experience of the 20th Century had proved such a move counter-productive (let the reader note!), and because it didn’t strike as an act of terror.

How we react to terrorism is addressed by this phrase, “lead us not into temptation.” We need to resist temptation in how we define terrorists, and also how we respond to them. To succeed, terrorism *needs* our complicity in responding to it; it needs the publicity of shock and awe. With publicity, even failed terrorist attacks are successful.

Deliver us from Evil.

Evil is one of the key words associated with terrorist activity, both in the media and in politics. Yet terrorists also see themselves as defending the powerless and standing up against a great evil. So just as we asked the question earlier of “who has the right to define whether you are a terrorist or a soldier?”, we also have the question raised “what is evil?”

In the Lord’s prayer, Jesus teaches us to say “deliver us from evil.” But who defines what evil is? When we realise that we ourselves might be defined as bearers of evil, it should make us wary of painting others in the same light. Giving evidence to the Chilcot inquiry, Tony Blair said he had no regrets about removing “the monster” Saddam, and that the world was now a safer place. I think he was certainly wrong to believe that the world became a safer place, but more to the point in connection with this line of the prayer, he was wrong to label Saddam a monster.

When we say “deliver us from evil” we need to realise that the evil may be within us. Demonising the enemy may be a strategy that leaders employ to get their way, but it only productive in the very short term. Ali Soufan was one of the FBI’s most experienced Al Qaeda interrogators. He told Taylor how he conducted interrogations. Sometimes he would kneel and pray with suspects at appropriate times of the day. He condemned waterboarding and other torture techniques. “We have our own style of building rapport,” he said. “It’s a longer process, and we do it step by step, and eventually they know that we are not evil after all.” And if we hope that others will see that we are not really evil after all, then we must believe the same about them. We cannot accede to the rhetoric of evil! George Bush: “We will rid the world of evildoers.” How completely mistaken and wrong!

So when we pray, “Deliver us from evil” we may sometimes have an idea of what we think that evil is, but we need to acknowledge that evil of which we are also a part. By making this a prayer, we are choosing to allow God to define the nature of evil and to identify where it lies, just as we pray that he should be the one to deliver us.

How can terrorism be defeated? Certainly not by declaring a war on it. As someone said, “Declaring war on terror is like trying to catch a field mouse with a tank.” At the same time, ignoring terrorists does not help because they desperately seek attention for their cause: ignoring them leads to more spectacular attacks. Terrorists are not strong in terms of financial, military or political might. Theirs are essentially symbolic acts, as someone said, “expressive power to cleanse the soul.” But the Lord’s Prayer centres our souls and reorients our trust in God. Through it we acknowledge that solutions do not lie in “taking matters into our own hands” even if we are called to be active in our faith. In fact, the sole action to which we are explicitly called in this prayer is the action to forgive.

For Further Reading:

Jürgen Todenhöfer: *My Journey Into the Heart of Terror: Ten Days in the Islamic State*, 2016.

Peter Taylor: *Talking to Terrorists*, Harper Press, 2011.

Scott Attran: *Talking to the Enemy – Religion, Brotherhood, and the (un)making of Terrorists*, 2010.

Louise Richardson: *What Terrorists Want*, Random House, 2007.