

When Terror Stalks

A sermon on Luke 13:31-35 & Philippians 3:17 - 4:1 by Nathan Nettleton, 17 March 2019
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Message

In a world that is hell-bent on self-destruction, Jesus calls us to gather to him and to love faithfully and vulnerably with him, rather than surrendering to the hate and fear.

Sermon

At that very hour
some Pharisees came and said to him,
“Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.”

At that very hour
the New Zealand Chief of Police said to them,
“Don’t go to the mosque today,
for a cold-blooded terrorist wants to kill you.
I know it is Friday, a holy day of obligation,
but don’t go.
He has already killed 49 of your brothers and sisters
and he may have accomplices still at large.”

And Jesus said,
“Go tell that snarling fox for me,
that I will stick to my path no matter what,
for I bow only to God, not to terror,
and I must do what God has called me to do.
No doubt Herod and his ilk
will catch up with me eventually
but I will not be dancing to their tune.”

And there were people of deep faith in those mosques on Friday
who continued to pray
even as the shots rang out
and the bullets flew
They had responded to the call to prayer
and they followed that call
even in the face of terror

The shooter’s manifesto of hate said
white European culture must prevail
Those who are not us must be turned back
We must glory in destroying them
purging them from our midst
terrorising them
The muslims are a threat to us all, he said,
they are terrorists who want to kill us

But we are not afraid of muslim terrorists for being muslim
but for being terrorists
Blinded by his hate
He became the very thing he was so frightened of
He pointed the finger at terrorists
screaming that they were the enemy
and then so mindlessly followed their script
reciprocating their every action
that he turned himself
into the spitting image of that which he so despised

Whether he despised them
or hero worshipped them
the result would have been the same
We become what we are fixated on

And Jesus said,
“Go tell that snarling fox for me,
that I will stick to my path no matter what
And the Prime Minister of New Zealand said,
we will not give in to terror
we will not reject these people who have made their home among us
be they migrants or refugees
we will not reject them
they have chosen to make their home in this country
this is their home
they are us

They are us
I sobbed at those words
I was born as part of the us that she represented
but I have chosen to make my home elsewhere
On Friday as I sobbed
I longed to belong again to an us
whose politicians could speak so eloquently
of welcome, of hospitality, of generous inclusion

But in truth, I am an exile
not because I left the land of my birth
but because I have given my allegiance to Jesus

As we heard the Apostle say tonight,
our citizenship is in heaven
and it is from there that we look for a leader who will save us
the Lord Jesus Christ

And, said the Apostle,
whatever land you live in
you are surrounded by many

who oppose the cross of Jesus
I have often told you of them
and now I tell you even with tears
They are hell-bent on destruction
their god is the purity of their blood
their quest for glory replicates what they most hate
their minds are poisoned by fantasies of earthly vengeance

Citizens of heaven
we live as exiles in every land

The victims are us, said the Prime Minister,
but the perpetrator of this crime is not us
My heart leapt
I desperately wanted to believe her
The perpetrator is nothing like me
and I am nothing like the perpetrator
I so want to believe that
And the jailed Cardinal is nothing like me either
and I am nothing like him
I so want to believe that
The Prime Minister eloquently gives voice
to a desperate hope that she and I share

But strangely I knew that we were both mistaken
The perpetrator is one of us
And when I persuade myself that I'm different
or that he's monstrously other
I miss the opportunity to look into my own heart
and face up to the truth about myself

I miss the opportunity
to recognise that my anger against him
and my desire to see him pay
are not as different as I wish
from his twisted rage against those
who he perceives as a threat

How can I be so sure that I'd be any different
if I was living my life
immersed in the echo chamber of hatreds
that he's been immersed in?

And how can I know what has been done to him?
Whether he has been abused by an archbishop
or raped in one of our toxic psych wards
or traumatised in a war?
How can I be sure that I'd be so different
if his life had happened to me?

If I cling desperately to my illusion of difference,
will I not fail to hear and understand Jesus's cry?
to know that it was a cry over us
over an us that I undoubtedly belong to

Jerusalem, Jerusalem
Christchurch, Christchurch
Melbourne, Melbourne
How often have I desired to gather your children together
as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,
but you were not willing!

I know that cry
I meditated on that cry for several days
during my recent retreat in the desert

In my prayers then
I shared that cry with Jesus
I grieved my inability to save the world,
to do anything to turn the world
from its headlong rush into destruction

I grieved my own impotence
I can give my life to preaching love and hope
but the world continues its plunge
into hatred, division and despair
Jerusalem, Jerusalem
Christchurch, Christchurch

I made peace with my grief to some extent
I heard Jesus's cry
and knew I was not alone
I understood that Jesus's desire to save the world from itself
was frustrated more than it was realised
However much I might wish otherwise
I have to follow him
into that place of frustration and despair too
I have to learn from him
what faithfulness looks like
in that unwelcome place
staring into the apocalypse

But if I only ponder how I share Jesus's cry
I may be again tripping myself
into a delusion of difference
Am I not also one over whom he cries?
Jerusalem, Jerusalem
Christchurch, Christchurch

Nathan, Nathan
How often have I desired to gather you
as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,
but you were not willing!

You were not willing
I called you to gather
but you were not willing
I called you to follow
but you were not willing
I called you to walk with me the way of peace,
the way of love, the way of mercy
but you were not willing
you were not willing

Is it true we were not willing?
Didn't we say Lord, Lord, Hallelujah Lord?
Didn't we pray, and read our bibles, and go to church?
Didn't we accept Jesus as Lord and saviour?
How can he say we were not willing?

Jerusalem, Jerusalem
Christchurch, Christchurch
Melbourne, Melbourne
How often have I desired to gather your children together
as a hen gathers her brood under her wings

Perhaps that's it
Perhaps in the face of the snarling foxes,
be they Herods or cold-cold-blooded terrorists,
perhaps in the face of these snarling foxes
we were hoping to gather round something
more fearsome and reassuring
than a hen

Couldn't he perhaps gather us
like the Lion of Judah protecting its cubs
something more than a match for the fox?

Couldn't he gather us
as a warrior messiah
parting the sea of terror
leading his people to the promised land
and drowning our pursuing enemies?

But even as I hear myself longing for that,
longing for a big powerful God
who rules with an iron fist
and deals out punishment

to all my enemies
I feel that sinking feeling again
and I see my illusions of difference fading away
Is the desire to hide behind an avenging god
really so different
from hiding behind an AR-15 assault rifle
painted with the names of my scary heroes?

Perhaps after all
just like that cowardly terrorist
I'm too scared to walk the way of peace with Jesus
to open my arms and expose my breast
like a mother hen
and say to terror's fox
'you'll have to take me first'

I'll bet there were people in those mosques
who died using their own bodies to shield others
There always are in these incidents
They are the real heroes,
those who like a mother hen
expose themselves to the fox
because they love others more than life itself

They are the ones who will know
what Jesus has shown us
but most of us still can't comprehend
that death truly has lost its sting
that being in the place of vulnerability
of powerlessness
even of death
is not nearly as toxic or fatal as we thought it was

They are the ones who will find
as Jesus has shown us
that it is right there in the place of crucifixion
that the pathway to the promised land
opens wide before us

Jesus is beckoning us all to take that pathway
It's open wide
and Jesus's wings are spread to gather us
and usher us along

Jesus promises no more protection
from the violence and chaos of the world
than a mother hen before a fox
He doesn't even speak of protecting us under those wings
just gathering us under them

But even from the place of terror and violence and death
those wings will continue to gather us
and usher us on the pathway to life
and probably the only way to miss it
is to refuse to gather
behind anything but an AR-15
or a violent avenging god

Jerusalem, Jerusalem
Melbourne, Melbourne
How often have I desired to gather your children together
as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,
but you were not willing!

Must your house be left to you desolate
or will you gather to me even now?
The world has lost the plot
and repeatedly let fear drive out love
but I have desired to gather you
and lead you on the pathway of self-sacrificing love
that overcomes all fear
even the fear of death
Are you willing, even now?
Will you gather under my wings?
Even now?
Will you?