Vicar’s Letter for September 2016

Dear Friends

We have all been appalled and horrified at the murder of Fr Jacques Hamel in Normandy, France on 26th July. I think the shock waves will continue for a long time. The murder of innocent people of whatever age or wherever such murders take place – terrorist suicide bombings, shootings at schools or in shopping areas – all are terrible, but the murder of one elderly faithful Roman Catholic priest whilst saying Mass seems especially shocking. For all Christians who join together to remember Jesus’ death and sacrifice in the Eucharist (also called: Mass, Holy Communion, The Lord’s Supper), this act of worship is sacred and holy and it speaks to us of liberation, equality and love. That it should be so terribly abused shakes us to the core.

Perhaps we are left feeling vulnerable and afraid. Perhaps we want to respond by retaliation or by closing our churches, making them even harder to access – just in case. But surely that is not the way forward. Perhaps we begin to feel even more suspicious of the person getting on the bus at the next stop or who we are standing next to in the queue in the supermarket or who is living in our street. But that can’t be the answer either. We can be tempted to be drawn into the terrorists’ intention to stir up hate and suspicion and set us against our neighbours who are of different faiths and cultures both in our towns and cities, but also globally.

Like other church leaders in this area I received a letter from Greater Manchester Police reminding us of the indiscriminate nature of terrorism and the brutal and senseless actions of these criminals. The letter assures us that the police have been working with church leaders here in the UK to establish a communication network through which reassurance and guidance to the Christian community can be passed. We are asked to remain alert but not alarmed. There is no current intelligence to suggest any attack planning of this nature in this country. However, we are all asked to review our security plans and to encourage us all to be vigilant. Any suspicious behaviour should be reported through 101 / 999 or the anti-terrorist hotline 0800 789 321.

There are some websites for advice and guidance on personal security for places of worship: <http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/counter-terrorism-protective-security-advice-for-places-of-worship> on the National Counter Terrorism website.

Also the Run Hide Tell: <http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/stay-safe-film>

There are calls to make Fr Jacques a saint and martyr. The Church is built on the blood of the martyrs, which means that our faith has been handed on through sacrifice, and there have been many, many martyrs down the ages – people who have not let their faith be swayed, even in the face of fear or death. Did you know the Pope has traditionally worn red shoes?! One reason given for this is that it is reminder to him and to the church that we stand on the sacrifice of many, not least Jesus Christ himself, whose blood has given us freedom and life eternal.

So we all have a choice – to hide or to continue to proclaim our faith. What will you choose?

With every blessing

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