

Change: Means and Ends

Today, the 14th of July, is France's National Day, commonly known as Bastille Day. It commemorates the storming of the Bastille fortress in Paris on the 14th of July 1789, which was an important turning point of the French Revolution. It also commemorates the Festival of the Federation which celebrated the unity of the French people a year later on the 14th of July 1790. The day is noted in particular for a large military parade in the morning along the Champs-Élysées in Paris in front of the President and various officials and dignitaries. Some years ago I was able to experience that for myself first hand.

Today also marks the first anniversary of the terror attack in Nice, on the 14th of July 2016, when a Tunisian man drove a truck into crowds during celebrations in that city. 86 people were killed and 434 injured along the famous Promenade des Anglais.

That attack in Nice was a terrible atrocity that shocked not only the French nation but sent ripples much further afield. It was an act of indiscriminate slaughter and there was no possible justification for it.

The French Revolution is a more difficult event to assess, though. It was a reaction against deep inequalities in French society. It was an attack on an elite that thought itself invincible and free to exploit others. One can thus at least understand the motives behind it.

However, the violence perpetrated was truly terrible. Estimates of the number of people executed range from 10,000 to 40,000. Even the lowest figure is horrendous. In the longer term the French Revolution resulted in the democratic society and institutions we see in France today. But did the ends justify the means?

In all such situations that is naturally a subject of much debate. Two weeks ago I talked about Cologne and the bombing raids on German cities in the Second World War. There is still a wide range of views on that policy.

I suppose any change can be painful, even change for the better. And at the heart of the Christian Gospel is the cross, that most cruel and inhuman form of death. Later many in the early Church suffered persecution for their faith – hence those words of encouragement we heard in our Bible reading just now (Hebrews 12.1-4).

It was through pain that humanity received redemption, reconciliation to God. That does not mean, though, that political, social and economic change can only be achieved through violence, pain and suffering. Far from it. The challenge is to establish justice peacefully, through dialogue and negotiation. And we give thanks for those who devote their lives tirelessly to that great task.

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