

Suffering for the Easter Faith

On the most holy Day of the Christian year. Easter Day, we heard of yet another dreadful atrocity, this time in Sri Lanka where a number of churches and hotels were specifically targeted by terrorists. The carnage wrought was truly horrific and many witnesses are likely to be traumatized for some time by what they saw. The death toll is continually rising – that last figure I heard was 359. Yet arguably more terrible than the scale is the individual human suffering caused to those who lost loved ones. We saw pictures of people who were inconsolable at their loss. There were many instances of all but one member of a family being killed.

I imagine that we are probably asking: how can one human being possibly contemplate inflicting such pain and suffering on other human beings, let alone actually carrying it out. It is doubtless outside our comprehension. Yet we know that such atrocities are occurring in one part or other of the world every day.

This reminds us forcibly of the dangers to which Christians in some countries are exposed. And the same applies to people of other faiths, as was shown by the earlier attacks on the mosques in New Zealand.

Our Bible reading just now (Acts 5.27-32) is one of those appointed for this coming Sunday. It reflects the dangers that Peter and the other apostles faced when they preached the Good News, the Easter message of salvation and of God's love.

Just like Jesus they were seen as a threat to the status quo, to the religious authorities. It was thus not surprising that the powers that be wanted to silence them. On this particular occasion they were set free, thanks to the intervention of the wise rabbi Gamaliel, Paul's teacher. Though that would not always be the case. And yet they persevered regardless and continued to preach openly.

Peter's position was quite clear: "We must obey God rather than any human authority". For us today that raises all kinds of questions. Are we always to be good citizens and go with the flow? Or are there times when we have to stand up against authority in defence of what we believe to be right? Certainly in later centuries, thanks to the Emperor Constantine, the links between Church and state became close – arguably too close.

Yet surely we are called to hold firm onto our Christian faith in the face not only of tragedy but also of oppression and injustice. We pray that the Christians of Sri Lanka and other places of danger may hold onto their Easter faith.

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