

THE NEW ZEALAND MASSACRE

The final link, the great stink and the much-needed ligament



On Friday 15 March 2019, 49 people were killed and more than 20 seriously injured (at the time of writing) in mass shootings at two mosques full of people attending Friday prayers in Christchurch, New Zealand. One shooting occurred at the Al Noor mosque near Hagley Park in the city's centre at about 1:45pm (local time) during Friday prayers, killing 41 people. The second occurred at a mosque in the nearby suburb of Linwood, where seven were killed. Another victim died later in hospital.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern described it as “one of New Zealand’s darkest days” and said the events in the city of Christchurch represented “an extraordinary and unprecedented act of violence.”

A man in his late 20s has been charged with murder and will appear in Christchurch court. Two others arrested at the scene with guns are being investigated. A fourth person arrested may have had nothing to do with the attack.

Authorities have not said who they have in custody. But a man who claimed responsibility for the shootings left a 74-page anti-immigrant manifesto in which he explained who he is and the reasons for his actions. He said he considered it a terrorist attack.

THE WORST IN RECENT HISORY

According to Wikipedia¹, this is the worst massacre in New Zealand and confirms the words of Prime Minister Ardern who said this is “one of New Zealand’s darkest days”. The following is a list of events that have been called “massacres”, that have occurred in New Zealand since 1951.

• Christchurch mosque shootings	15 March 2019	Christchurch	49 dead (at time of writing)
• Ashburton Work and Income murders	1 September 2014	Ashburton	2 dead
• Panmure RSA murders	8 December 2001	Panmure	3 dead
• Raurimu Rampage	8 February 1997	Raurimu	6 dead
• New Empire Hotel arson	4 February 1995	Hamilton	6 dead
• Bain family murders	20 June 1994	Dunedin	5 dead
• Ratima family murders	26 June 1992	Masterton	7 dead
• Schlaepfer family murders	20 May 1992	Paerata	7 dead
• Aramoana massacre	13–14 November 1990	Aramoana	14 dead
• Noema Rika murders	27 May 1951	Otaki	5 dead

THE FINAL LINK IN A LONG CHAIN

For most viewers, watching the act of terror unfolding on their televisions, the perpetrator is the one carrying the weapon and the one who finally pulls the trigger. However, the one who pulls the trigger is only the final link in a long chain of negativity, suspicion, fear and hatred. Every post on social media that polarises people becomes another link in a deadly chain that has the potential to influence someone who is willing to pull a trigger. Regardless of the topic – whether it be refugees, race, religion, politics or simply people who live and think differently to us –

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_massacres_in_New_Zealand

any post that creates a hint of suspicion can contribute to one person picking up a weapon and becoming the final link in a chain of hatred.

Sadly, Christians also contribute to this toxic process. Very often the platform of 'TRUTH' is used as an excuse to sow fear, hatred and suspicion. We need to be constantly reminded that our words either "give life" or "drain life", there is no neutral exchange. Our comments influence people. We should take extra care of the possible 'hidden' messages we communicate in the name of Christ. Truth should never become a motive for guiding people into a place of suspicion or hatred.

THE GREAT STINK OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Thomas Breuer, Senior Vice President and Chief Medical Officer of GSK Vaccines, recently wrote an article on what the "great stink" of 1858 can teach us about misinformation on social media².



Breuer writes the following: *"In the summer of 1858, a heat wave in London caused the incredibly polluted River Thames to ferment, producing a stench so overpowering that it brought life in the city to a stop – an incident that came to be known as the Great Stink. Now, you might be asking, what can an incident in 1858 teach us about misinformation on social media in 2019? Quite a lot, as you will see."*

Understanding the Great Stink

To start with, it is important to understand that the Great Stink did not happen overnight. Pollution in the River Thames, and the unpleasant smells and disease outbreaks that came with it, was already recognized as a problem in the 1600s. However, without an idea of how to fix this, or a strong incentive for significant actions, the city continued its

rapid transformation from Roman outpost to urban metropolis; with a focus on growth rather than on the infrastructure or regulations needed to adequately sustain it.

This all changed in 1858 with the Great Stink. Soaring summer temperatures created a stench so bad that efforts to mask the smell with chloride of lime (industrial bleach) failed. As a result, all activity in the city, economic and otherwise, stopped and politicians were forced to admit that real reform could no longer be delayed.

Infrastructure had to be transformed; stronger regulations introduced and enforced. In the end, the Great Stink sparked a sanitary revolution that transformed the Thames into the cleaner, safer river that it is today."

The Great Stink of Social Media

There is no doubt that acts of violence are birthed in the negativity of like-minded people. One post of suspicion, confirmed by another one of hatred, and then explored by one of fear, eventually leads to one person picking up a gun, walking into a mosque and indiscriminately shooting people on behalf of all who fed his fears. The "great stink" – the horror of the one pulling the final trigger – started in the 'cesspool of negativity' on social media and then followed the process of unchecked misinformation, conspiracy theories, assumptions and self-discovered conclusions. Breuer refers to the prevalence of misinformation on Social Media as *"the digital equivalent of the Great Stink"*. He adds that *"This has been a growing issue for years, but not so great that those accountable felt compelled to more than the digital equivalent of using industrial bleach to mask the smell. Until now. Even though today's social media platforms have community standards, systems in place to report violations, and consequences for those who break the rules; these are insufficient to stop the systematic spread of misinformation."*

² <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/what-great-stink-1858-can-teach-us-misinformation-breuer-md-msc>

Real Change is Needed

Breuer concludes: *“The Great Stink - was never about the smell. In 1858, it was still believed that some diseases, like cholera, were spread through ‘bad air’. This misunderstanding led to the introduction of flush toilets in the houses of the wealthy, which effectively removed ‘bad air’ from the house; and increased the amount of raw sewage being pumped into the River Thames. Sadly, by focusing too much on the wrong problem (smell), the real issue – contaminated water – only got worse.*

In the same way, if the spread of misinformation itself was the real problem on social media, then we could solve everything by flushing the misinformation away, removing its foul stench. However, I worry that this hides the real issue that lies beneath – a loss of trust. The reality is that we are suffering from an on-going and worsening loss of trust in our institutions, industries, governments and even, in science itself. For a problem like this, real change is needed.”

And this is where the Church comes in. We, as followers of Christ, need to be reminded often that our attitudes, thoughts and communication should always reflect the One we follow:

- Philippians 4:8 “In conclusion, my friends, fill your minds with those things that are good and that deserve praise: things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and honourable.”
- James 3:17 “But the wisdom from above is pure first of all; it is also peaceful, gentle, and friendly; it is full of compassion and produces a harvest of good deeds; it is free from prejudice and hypocrisy.”

If we don’t fill our minds with that which is “pure, lovely, noble, true and honourable”, then we move outside the parameters of a redemptive God and into the sphere of the one who seeks to destroy, kill and murder. Once again, there will be no neutral exchange. This is non-negotiable. We need to ask ourselves whether our witness, in the way that we communicate truth on social media, is truly engaging in its biblical mission of bringing the blessing of God to people.

Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, at her news conference alluded to anti-immigrant sentiment as the possible motive, saying that while many people affected by the shootings may be migrants or refugees, “they have chosen to make New Zealand their home, and it is their home. They are us. The person who has perpetuated this violence against ‘us’, is not.”

“They are us,” is a profound statement of inclusivity by the Prime Minister. By saying this, Ms Adern clearly indicated that New Zealanders are identified by attitude and not by citizenship. In the same way the Church should always be messengers of hope and reconciliation. This is the ‘identity document’ we carry.

THE LIGAMENT OF LOVE

In Colossians 3, Paul provides a comprehensive list of virtues that should be the “adornments on the robe” of every believer. “Clothe yourselves,” he says (in verse 12), “with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance and forgiveness.” And once again, like in most of his letters, Paul ends with the one virtue that contains the whole of Christian perfection, and links all the parts of it together, and, surprise, surprise, it is not TRUTH, it is LOVE.

When Paul refers to the word “bond” in “bond of perfectness”³ he uses the Greek word *SUNDESMOS*, which is also the word used for LIGAMENT. Love is therefore the ‘ligament’ that binds all virtues into perfection. This is extremely significant and intentional. A ligament in the human body is a short band of tough, flexible, fibrous connective tissue which connects two bones or cartilage or holds together a joint. It is also a membranous fold that supports an organ and keeps it in position.

From a spiritual perspective therefore, love (or charity) is a tough but flexible virtue that links together all other virtues. It protects the Body and keeps it in the right position before God, who is the “Author and Perfecter” of love. This does not minimise the importance of truth, or any other virtue for that matter, but it does emphasise the fact that love contains the ability to join together and unite, more than any virtue.

³ Colossians 3:14 “And above all these things put on charity (*love*), which is the bond of perfectness.” (KJV)

In a sense truth holds all virtues together while love links all virtues together. The reason is simple – truth cannot, and should not, be compromising and flexible. Truth is firm and has a firm foundation. But of equal importance is the fact that love cannot, and should not, be rigid and unbending. Paul explains in 1 Timothy 1:5 that "The goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." Note that truth is not the goal, love is. Truth is the means, it is subordinate – truth serves love. The "goal" of truth is ultimately to reveal the true nature of God: LOVE.

This 'ligament' of Biblical virtue needs to be flexible and compassionate. Love does not rejoice "IN" truth but "WITH" truth⁴. Love shapes how we speak the truth⁵, while truth shapes how we show love⁶.

CONCLUSION

2 Corinthians 2:16 "For those who are being lost, it is a deadly stench that kills; but for those who are being saved, it is a fragrance that brings life. Who, then, is capable for such a task?"

Acts of violence of this magnitude seldom happen on the spur of the moment, driven solely by an individual who feels an urge to destroy. It takes a community, a process and a cause to manipulate people into action. In the same way that the "great stink" of social media can manipulate people into acts of terror, the fragrance of Christ can mobilise people to offer life.

In his book, *A Farewell to Mars*, Brian Zahnd writes the following: "It is much easier to unite people around a Jesus who hates our enemies and blesses our wars than it is to unite people around a Jesus who calls us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us."

May this be the fragrance of those who follow Christ.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:6 "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth."

⁵ Ephesians 4:15 "Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ."

⁶ 1 John 5:2-3 "This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome."