

IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE MOSQUE SHOOTINGS

Uncovering the **GOOD** and the **SAD** in the midst of the **UGLY**

By Mike Burnard

Any tragedy has the potential to make us either better or bitter. The lessons in the aftermath of the New Zealand mosque shooting are clear – the tragedy should be mourned, the good that came from it should be celebrated and the failures should be acknowledged and rectified. It is through this prism that all should view the massacre and the subsequent period of mourning.

Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, rightly commented that “this is New Zealand’s darkest hour”, but this is also an opportunity to learn and grow. Both individual and national tragedies do happen, as we all know from personal experience. We need to identify the GOOD and the SAD in the midst of the UGLY. The challenge is to use these experiences to catapult ourselves to new heights.



There were a number of lessons to be learnt from the tragedy in Christchurch:

IT IS GOOD, profoundly good, that Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, at her news conference after the attack confirmed that the Muslim community is as much part of New Zealand as any other citizen. “They (the refugees) 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 significant, intentional and ultimately praiseworthy statement of inclusivity by the Prime Minister.

Ms Ardern’s statement becomes even more significant when contrasted with the experience of many Christians living in Muslim countries under the ever-present shadow of the ‘*dhimmitude*’. ‘*Dhimmitude*’ is the Muslim system of controlling non-Muslim citizens. It is specifically the TAXING of non-Muslims in exchange for tolerating their presence AND as a coercive means of converting “conquered remnants” to Islam. In Saudi Arabia, for example, Christians are barred from becoming citizens and laws make it illegal to import, print or own Christian materials. The fact that Ms Ardern referred to them as “*us*” was profound for anybody who understands the context of Islamic ‘*dhimmitude*’.

IT IS SAD, however, that there is also a ‘them’ in the story that will never make the headlines. According to Amnesty International¹ New Zealand has committed to accept only 750 refugees in its annual quota. This refugee quota has not been raised in nearly 30 years, despite the huge increase in displaced people from the Middle East. When compared to the rest of the world, New Zealand ranks 90th per capita in resettlement. If you take the country’s wealth into account, they drop to an embarrassing 116th in the world. Australia settles five times as many refugees and asylum seekers on a per capita basis and a developing country like Lebanon (with the same population size as New Zealand) takes in 250 refugees for every 1 settling in New Zealand. A report from Amnesty International in October 2016 stated that 56 percent of the world’s 21 million refugees are being hosted by just 10 nations, and this group of nations that accept the most refugees comprises just 2.5 percent of the global economy. Significantly, all of these nations are in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia. Jordan tops the list of nations that accept the most refugees, followed by Turkey, Pakistan, and Lebanon.

¹ https://www.amnesty.org.nz/sites/default/files/family_reunification_fact_sheet.pdf

IT IS GOOD that Christian leaders across the globe united their voices in condemning the attack. Proverb 31:8-9 teaches us to “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. To speak up and judge fairly; to defend the rights of the poor and needy.” Where injustice prevails, Christians should speak up, regardless of race, religion or nationality. We serve a God who is not only concerned about Christians that are persecuted but about justice as a principle. He is a God of justice who seeks justice for all. That is ultimately the message of the cross.

IT IS SAD, however, that the church is less vocal in condemning ‘inspirational terrorism’ – the act of intolerance on social media. Sadly, when Brenton Tarrant started his rampage, it was only the final link in a long chain of negativity, suspicion, fear and hatred. In his manifesto, Brenton credits far-right personality Candace Owens with beginning his radicalisation. He states: “Each time she spoke I was stunned by her insights and her own views helped push me further and further into the belief of violence over meekness.” Every post on social media that polarises people from one another becomes a link in a deadly chain that has the potential to inspire someone to “pull a trigger”. Regardless of the topic, whether it be refugees, race, religion, political parties or simply people who live and think differently to us – any post that creates a hint of suspicion – contributes to one person picking up a weapon and becoming the final link in a chain of hatred. Sadly, Christians contribute to this toxic process and this is not addressed from the pulpit often enough.



IT IS GOOD to see how the Christian community cared for and reached out with Christian love to the Muslim community in need. Charles Hewitt, national leader of New Zealand Baptist Churches, flew to Christchurch to be with the Baptist community as they prayed for the Muslim community. Hewitt expressed his condolences and prayers for the victims and their families on behalf of the Christian community as follows: “The Baptist Churches of New Zealand share in the grief of the Muslim community. You should be able to practise your faith in peace. We sharply condemn all hatred and violence. We pray for you in your suffering.”

This is truly commendable and reflects the heart of a God who is described in 2Corinthians 1:3 as the “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.”

IT IS SAD, however, that the same outpouring of compassion is not there for the Muslim community in Syria who have suffered three times the number of deaths – 171 deaths – every day of the year for the past 8 years, non-stop massacres and killings. It is also sad that the same outpouring of compassion was absent when at least 20 people were killed in twin blasts at a Roman Catholic cathedral on the southern Philippine island of Jolo a month ago, or the bomb explosions in Egypt on Palm Sunday 2017. We all seem to suffer from ‘selective compassion’, an attribute that thankfully never features in the heart of the Saviour. He didn’t love Israel so much that He gave His only begotten son, He loved the world so much. He loved the Muslims in the mosque in Christchurch as much as He did the Catholics in Jolo or the Copts in Tanta. He is the God of all, for all. He does not suffer from ‘selective compassion’.

IT IS GOOD that the act of violence was condemned by all. Brenton Tarrant will most probably have some far-right followers who would support his cause, but they were drowned out by the global outcry of repulsion at the murders. No cause can justify cold-blooded murder of innocent people – not in New Zealand, not in Syria, not in Yemen – nowhere. And it was good that global leaders; political, cultural and religious, united their voices as they condemned the Christchurch attack. Few things unite people so quickly as a common enemy and Brenton Tarrant provided that image.

IT IS SAD, however, that equally violent acts in the Muslim nation of Yemen, the Christian nation of South Sudan, the Buddhist nation of Myanmar and the Hindu nation of India seem to carry the approval of global leaders if measured by their overwhelming silence. There seems to be a greater intolerance for Muslims being killed in a Christian nation than Muslims being killed in a Muslim nation, or Christians being killed in a Muslim nation for that matter. The location of the event seems to determine the significance of the event.

Life is a gift from God. Adam became a living being by the breath of God (Gen. 2:7), and if God were to withdraw his breath from humans, they would perish (Job 34:14–15). Since life belongs to God, humans do not have absolute autonomy over their own lives but are stewards of the life given to them by God. The lives of all humans, both their own and others', are to be cherished and guarded.

IT IS GOOD that most (sadly not all) news outlets refused to show the live-stream video of the shootings. Tarrant 'live-streamed' the shooting from the moment he drove to the Al Noor Mosque in Christchurch and parked his car to the point where the shooting ended 17 minutes later. Even though news sources had access to the footage, they refused to show it.

IT IS SAD, however, that millions across the globe nevertheless went out of their way to obtain the video, watch it and, in so doing, legitimised the shootings. A 'live-stream' on social media is automated and anyone with a social media account has access to it. By the time people, who have control over the social media platform, realised what was going on it was already too late to shut it down. The 'artificial intelligence' (AI) behind social media is not smart enough to determine that a live atrocity is taking place and as such it allowed the 'streaming' to continue. Only after the fact, when the people who police social media content realised what was going on, were they able to remove the video from the platform. However, by then it was too late, it had been placed on other platforms and started multiplying as people posted and reposted.

The aim of Tarrant's shooting spree and live-streaming every second of the horror was not to document the event but to publish his propaganda as widely as possible. The reality is that everybody, and anybody, who watched it, even those who were appalled by it, legitimised the shootings. Sensation was once again victorious over common decency.

IT IS GOOD that society honoured the dead by cancelling sporting events, maintaining a minute of silence before games and even persuading the Canterbury Crusader rugby team to reconsider their name. These acts showed a communal effort to bring relief through civil acts of respect combined with demonstrations of kindness. Relief will never come by pointing fingers, placing guilt or pursuing revenge.

IT IS SAD that in Muslim nations, leaders hijacked the event to make Islam the victim, and the Western world the aggressor. In a public broadcast, President Erdogan of Turkey condemned the deadly attack on the mosques, describing them as "the latest example of rising racism and Islamophobia." "With this attack," he said "hostility towards Islam, that the world has been idly watching and even encouraging for some time, has gone beyond individual harassment to reach the level of mass killing."

Al-Azhar, the world's foremost Sunni Islamic institution and university, said the attacks reflect an "escalation of the discourse of hate, xenophobia and Islamophobia" in Western countries.

These proclamations aim to politicise events for the benefit of their religion and not for the relief of the victims.

IT IS GOOD that the horrific event got the news coverage that it did. The shooting was widely broadcast around the world, in-depth and over an extended period. Not even the Ethiopian plane crash that killed 3 times as many people from 30 nations got the same coverage.

IT IS SAD that the coverage lacked the investigative nature of reporting that should be included in any story of this magnitude. The news media focussed exclusively on the “killing of Muslims” by a “white supremacist”, a script that media experts know will keep viewers glued to their TV screens for days on end. Meaningful news, however, should have included questions as to why the Muslims sought refuge in New Zealand in the first place. Why did they leave their culture, religion, family and even home, and seek refuge in a Western nation while there are more than 50 nations globally that share their same values and beliefs?



Very few Muslim refugees that I have met in my seven years of research expressed a desire to find refuge in Muslim nations. Those who have fled Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq, etc always seek asylum in the USA, Europe, Canada, Australia or New Zealand. The reason is simple – nations built on Christian values provide platforms for peace to reign. Even the knowledge of isolated attacks seems far more acceptable than the daily threats of war, extremism and violence. One attack cannot be equated to the daily threat of violence.

Our hearts continue to go out to those who have suffered loss in the midst of terror, and to those who were left in despair by the unexpected evil that shook a nation. But it is in these times of tragedy that Christians reaffirm their dependence on Christ – not because there is no evil in the world, but because He has overcome evil; and not because there is no darkness in the world, but because light will always conquer darkness. The test of mercy is only revealed when we can show mercy to those who we feel least deserve our forgiveness.

May this be a time for goodness to be born as people seek answers to questions they have not contemplated before. May the answer from a Comforter reveal the cross of forgiveness in new ways; grace for the sinner, redemption for the lost and freedom from evil.

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