**22nd November 2015**

**2 Kings 23**

Antoine Leiris, a journalist, decided to address the gunmen after his wife Hélène Muyal, 35, was killed in the atrocity at the Bataclan concert hall on Friday night.

In an emotional note on Facebook titled “You will not have my hatred”, Leiris wrote: “On Friday evening you stole the life of an exceptional person, the love of my life, the mother of my son, but you will not have my hatred.

“I don’t know who you are and I don’t want to know, you are dead souls. If this God for whom you kill blindly made us in his image, every bullet in the body of my wife is a wound in his heart.

“So no, I will not give you the satisfaction of hating you. You want it, but to respond to hatred with anger would be to give in to the same ignorance that made you what you are.”

The letter continued: “You would like me to be scared, for me to look at my fellow citizens with a suspicious eye, for me to sacrifice my liberty for my security. You have lost.

“Of course I am devastated with grief, I grant you this small victory, but it will be short-lived. I know she will be with us every day and we will find each other in heaven with free souls which you will never have.

These are difficult times, when acts of hatred can well spurn further acts of hatred. As we follow the Prince of Peace we need always to keep our eyes on Jesus and not on our earthly passions and anger. How do we respond as Christians to these acts of violence, in the name of God.

Antonie Leiris speech points to the fact that these gunmen in Paris were motivated by their beliefs in God. The set passage for today is challenging in the wake of the Paris attacks.

Our biblical passage this week is a text of terror; a text of intolerance and violence.

Look at this story: Josiah becomes the King of Judah and renews the Covenant. He reads the Book of the Torah, the Jewish law books, probably Deuteronomy. As a result of reading this book he orders that all the other shrines in the country are demolished and all the priests of the pagan gods, mediums and spiritualists, are slaughtered and their idols destroyed. It doesn’t take a leap of imagination to substitute Josiah the Jewish King for Abdelhammid Abaaoud the Jihadist who allegedly masterminded the Paris attacks.

The author of 2 Kings comments (23.25): ‘neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did – with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with the law of Moses.’ In other words it suggests divine approval for all his actions.

Most preachers would spiritualise and individualise this passage and talk about needing to take drastic action to sort out what is wrong in your life and air rush out the violence and intolerance and dodge the difficult questions this raises about how this can be the word of God?

I was always brought up to take the Bible seriously, although not always literally. There are strands in all religions, not just Islam, but also Christianity and Judaism and others that are literalists. They take their sacred text literally as addressing them today as the divine word – every word written is the literal word of God.

For most of Christian history Christians have seen the Bible as inspired by God but written by humans: humans in their own limited understandings, cultures and contexts. As soon as you start saying these things people say that’s too complicated for me – it all sounds as if you can’t trust the bible, that you are liberalising it or doubting it. Far from it – we are taking it seriously, to try and understand how these writers encountered God, what their relationship with God was like then - but knowing that relationships develop as you understand more and grow together. The Bible is our vital authority for faith because it details those decisive and authoritative encounters with God, particularly with Jesus, that shapes our believing and our relationship to God. But there is a danger in taking every word as the word of God.

The Islamist Jihadis do and they see in texts like this authorisation to go out and commit atrocities in the name of God. Like Josiah they see the world as corrupt and full of idolatry and they want to purge the world of such infidels.

This fundamentalist puritanical ‘righteous against the unrighteous’ violently intolerant streak is of course not the sole preserve of Islam. When I was out in Israel this summer I read about Tony Campolo the American Baptist minister having a confrontation with a Jewish settler in the West Bank who believed that God had promised and divinely ordained that the Jews should have this land. Campolo asked what should be done with all the people who live in that land right now?

‘He said they will have to leave, and if they won’t go voluntarily they must be forced to leave. And if they won’t leave they will have to be killed.’

Shocked and disbelieving at what he had just heard Campolo asked ‘are you talking about genocide?’

The settler’s response was ‘well didn’t God ordain genocide when the Jews went into the Holy land the first time? Where the Jews not ordered to kill every man, woman and child along with every animal? The God who ordered genocide back then is the same God we have today.’

Campolo said that his Christian understanding of God as revealed in Jesus Christ trumps whatever was thought about God back in the Old Testament days and that the God revealed in Jesus is God who does not will genocide. ‘I’m not sure we worship the same God’ said Campolo. ‘I don’t believe in Jesus’ said the settler.

(I’ll talk further about these issues at the Re Reading Romans talk on Thursday)

But of course you don’t need religion and claim divine backing to be violently intolerant, lest anyone trots out that favourite repost that religion causes conflict. If you want intolerant atheists then your hall of notoriety has three of the worst offenders in the whole of history: Stalin, Mao Tse Tung and Pol Pot. You don’t need religion to justify violence and terror and intolerance. Those on a righteous campaign to deal with those with the wrong beliefs, values and practices can be motivated by all sorts of factors. There are zealous people in all walks of life on a mission to convert the rest of us, sometimes very forcibly. When you believe you are absolutely right you can terrorise those who you deem are wrong. If you are a violent person you will terrorise with violence.

To say all Muslims are terrorists because of the actions of these extremists is like saying Christians are all racists because of the Klu Klux Klan. But you always get some who give you a bad name: not in our name.

But this passage also raises other pertinent questions. Josiah finds himself in a position where he believed his society had gone in a wrong direction. His grandfather the King Manasseh had worshipped pagan gods, had conducted child sacrifices, practised the occult in an attempt to control his fate. These kinds of practices were becoming endemic in the culture of Josiah’s days. How can you bring cultural change? How can you change the habits of the people?

At the end of the First Civil War in England (1642-1646) the victorious English and Welsh parliament was dominated by Presbyterian MPs supported by their Scottish allies in the war against King Charles I. This powerful alliance attempted to disestablish the Church of England and the create a national Presbyterian church (similar to the Scottish Kirk). Anglican Church festivals, which were felt to be too similar to Roman Catholic ceremonies, were abolished: one of these festivals was, of course, Christmas. The whole ceremony of Christmas, which still to a great extent was a twelve-day long festival, was anathema to the new religious regime, which invoked God’s blessing through Sunday-observance and regular fasts, rather than great blow-outs of over-eating.

In December 1647 Parliament ordered that there should be no holiday and shops should stay open on 25 December. No one was to decorate their houses with evergreens or celebrate in any way.

Popular support for the ban ebbed away and in several towns there were major riots over Christmas 1647. Puritan ministers were pelted with mud as they went through the town. In London, shops closed for the day, evergreens were hung in the doorways of the town and the mayor’s attempt to disrupt the celebrations were resisted violently. In Ipswich, youths armed with spiked clubs patrolled the streets to keep the shops closed.

After the second civil war, Presbyterians in parliament were largely marginalised and the republican regime, established after the execution of King Charles I (30 January 1649), was less hardline on the celebration of Christmas. [[1]](#endnote-1)

One can only imagine what the puritans would have made of our contemporary Christmas celebrations. They really would want to burn us at the stakes now.

Culture is changing but changes slowly. Old habits die hard as they say. Churches are notoriously resistant to change – which is why most of the growing churches in this country are newly established churches (you can’t put new wine in old wineskins and all that). But our culture is changing and over the last few decades Christianity has become more marginal and private in our culture. Apparently a cinema advert featuring the Lord’s Prayer, has been banned because it could offend those of "differing faiths and no faith"[[2]](#endnote-2). Churches are closing as a result – and our church in Sharpness is in danger of closing because all churches need committed people and money to keep them going.

Back to the passage and Josiah’s reformation involves undoing his father’s radical innovations. He reasserted the traditional religion of the land. This involved abolishing the high places, which had been part of Israelite religion throughout Israel’s history in the country. Sometimes they were places where God was worshipped; sometimes they were places were Israel worshipped other gods.

If you were a king you wanted to make sure Israel was worshipping God and doing it properly and you were in a position of influence to control how that would happen. It would be virtually impossible to control what happened at sanctuaries all over the country. So Josiah closes them down. He is able to concentrate worship on Jerusalem because in his day Judah had been cut down to the size of a county, so requiring people to come to Jerusalem, at least for the festivals, was more of a practical possibility.

Josiah also beings the Torah scroll, probably the book of Deuteronomy, back into the centre of worship. He has recovered it in chapter 22. We don’t know whether it had been gathering dust for years or not but this is when it comes back into life and centrality of worship.

As well as copious instructions about loyalty of God and how this is to work out Deuteronomy incorporates some hair raising warnings about what will happen to Israel as a consequence of doing the kind of things the community was doing in Josiah’s days.

In the first instance it makes Josiah go and ask a prophet what action to take (even though Deuteronomy incorporates pretty clear implications). They go to see the prophetess Huldah in chapter 22 verse 14. – Which indicates that it was taken for granted the activity of female as well as male prophets.

The combination of reading the book of Deuteronomy and consulting the prophetess stimulates the making of a covenant. Usually God takes the initiative in making a covenant but in this situation it is the king who reforms his country and makes a commitment. His privilege and responsibility as a leader is to embody a proper response to God in his own life and then use his influence on people so they make their response to God.

If you are leading a business, or a school, or a church, or any group or organisation – you have influence and how you use that influence will be all important. I listened to how former Prime Minister Tony Blair recounted the time he was given some "management" advice from ex-Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson.

Blair asked hypothetically what he should do with a colleague who was tough to deal with, with Ferguson responding he should simply "get rid of them". But what if they kept coming back into the changing room? Ferguson said you don’t want any one undermining your control.

Josiah in this passage literally gets rid of those pagan priest and occultists who sacrifice children. He has them slaughtered.

But before we get all high minded about how shocking the tactics are by King Josiah just listen in on what is being talked about as retaliation for these Islamic Sate attacks. How do you deal with evil, uncompromising, belligerent, violent and merciless opposition? Throw more bombs at them? Attempt to annihilate them and bomb them to hell. It is being said that you can’t negotiate with these kinds of terrorists so the instructions are now to shoot to kill. Canon Andrew White, known as the Vicar of Baghdad, has said the only answer to the threat of Islamic State is "to radically destroy them".

‘I don't think we can do it by dropping bombs. We have got to bring about real change. It is a terrible thing to say as a priest."[[3]](#endnote-3)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Christian pacifist who was part of the Confessing Church that opposed Hitler and the Nazis. He got caught up in the resistance movement and died in a concentration camp for his part in the plot to assassinate Hitler. He knew that killing Hitler was sinful. He did so with great ambivalence, admitting that he was demonstrating his lack of faith and his lack of trust in God at a crucial time in the history of Germany. He never attempted to justify what he did. He wasn’t asking people to pray for him or bless him; in fact just the opposite. It was as if he were saying, ‘I’m getting ready to sin, but I don’t know what else to do and I’m willing to face God with this sin on my hands’.

This is different from asking God to bless us in our wars and our violence. We may not agree on whether or not there is a place for necessary evil in the world, but perhaps we can agree always to call it evil, even when it is deemed necessary.

These responses are not a million miles away from King Josiah’s response to what he deemed as evil in his land. His response when confronted with evil is drastic and decisive too.

Here’s where I spiritualise and individualise this reading; Jesus said something similar in his sermon on the mount (Matthew 5.27-30) when talking about adultery: ‘when something causes us to sin cut it out. If your eye causes you to sin: pluck it out. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off’. Off course he was talking in hyperbole – not to be taken literally – though sadly some people do – but there are times when you cannot tolerate something that is harmful, destructive and quite frankly wrong. Take decisive action – even if it is drastic.

It is very hard to know what response to make to try and destroy Islamic State. You can combat troops on the ground but an ideology is more difficult to confront. A quote from Revd Martin Luther King has been doing the rounds on social media:

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

Radical love has always been the way of Jesus. As our passage from Romans says: ‘Accept one another as Christ has accepted you’

Ludovic Bombas was a computer engineer who died after putting himself in front of a friend to protect her from gunfire as they celebrated a birthday at one of the restaurants that came under attack in Paris a week ago last Friday. Aged 40, he was hit and killed instantly. His brother said ‘he threw himself in front of a friend to protect her. He was killed by those barbaric people. His act of courage enabled the girl to survive with only an injury to her arm. Mr Boumbas, who was known as Ludo, was at the Belle Equipe restaurant in northern Paris when terrorists struck. He was among 19 people killed in the restaurant, including many others at the 35th birthday party of Houda Saddi who died alongside her sister Halima.

The woman he saved was Chloe Clement, who is recovering in hospital where she keeps repeating the name of her saviour. As we were reminded a couple of weeks ago on remembrance Sunday – greater love has no one than this, that they lay down their life for a friend. In Ludo’s case he died taking a bullet for his friend.

Jesus took the bullet for us – in dying for the sin of the world. He took on evil, sin and death but didn’t return hatred and vengeance. Instead he triumphed through sacrificial love. Only love can drive out hate.

May God help us as we respond to evil and the forces that threaten our freedom and liberty whether personally or corporately. May God bless the French and all the nations of the world that they may collectively have wisdom in how to work together for a peaceful free world. May God give us wisdom and discernment in reading scripture and give to those in other religions wisdom and discernment in reading their holy texts. May God show us how to bring peaceful change to our culture – the culture of our homes, our workplaces, our nations – that they reflect his ways of peace and justice. May God deliver us all from evil.

**Questions:**

How do you read and understand this passage (2 kings 23)?

What would you say to someone who said that religion only causes wars?

Have you any experiences of culture change – whether at work, church, or elsewhere. What helped change and what resisted change?

In tackling evil do you see a need for ‘necessary evil’?

What is the best way of responding to terrorists? Can we/should we forgive them?

1. https://christmasunwrapped.wordpress.com/2010/12/14/christmas-is-cancelled/ [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-34891928> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.premier.org.uk/News/World/Vicar-of-Baghdad-Canon-Andrew-White-calls-for-war-and-ground-troops-to-defeat-Islamic-State>

   Using material from J Goldingay: 1and 2 Kings for Everyone, pub. SPCK 2011 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ― [Martin Luther King Jr.](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/23924.Martin_Luther_King_Jr_), [*A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches*](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/52037) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)