

It's very difficult for us to be able to put ourselves in the position of someone who becomes a suicide bomber. The kamikaze pilots or allied troops volunteering for hopeless missions from which there was no hope of return in the second world war were brave people willing to give their lives to defend their country. They come from recognisable military traditions, which cherish honour and remembrance and values self-sacrifice. But what do we make of civilians, women as well as men, willing to blow themselves up to take the lives of fellow citizens as well as foreign soldiers, when there is no obvious end to conflict in sight, no clear military aim other than destabilising the situation further?

Such people are not always ignorant, poor or obviously mentally ill. They aren't always under the thrall of some evil genius persuading them that black is white, and white is black. Nor are they all poor folk giving their lives for the sake of a pension from terrorist paymasters to feed their kin, when they've failed to provide by any other means. They can be well educated, and choose for themselves to be an instrument of random death for others. Something has to be seriously wrong in a world producing people who make such choices. What compels them?

When a people, a culture, a whole way of life, a vision of the future, is overshadowed and threatened, when people's freedom and security is taken away to the point where they feel the very survival of their family, tribe, nation, religion, culture is threatened, desperation sets in. It drives the few beyond caution or prudence, to consider a way they can invest the remains of their liberty in action, whether as protest, or targeted to avenge the plight of their people. They are driven to re-distribute some of the violence and suffering their own kind has experienced. They want others to feel the suffering they and theirs have suffered. That's what we learn from Afghanistan, Iraq, the Holy Land, and even from the few in the UK, Germany, Japan, the US and other countries who have turned to suicide terrorism. It's a similar logic too for the lone gunman on a spree of murder ending in suicide. I will make you suffer until you stop me suffering. It's the perverse logic behind all punishment, all kinds of retaliation for offences.

Regardless of the fact that a hundred Palestinians have died in Gaza for each Israeli death in the recent war, neither party flinches from the conviction that violence will achieve their aims that retaliation works. There's simply no shame at the absurdity and wickedness of it all. It is the logic of the devil at work. The devil, whose name means divider, author of chaos.

Two centuries before Jesus, Jewish heroes died refusing to defend themselves from armies attacking on the Sabbath, but soon in the face of desperation, others chose to make war on the Sabbath, claiming God's permission to defend their way of life and their faith from destruction by foreign colonisers. In Jesus' time, there was the Zealot party, who believed they could overthrow the Romans by violence. They dealt in terrorist attacks, and no doubt had suicide squads ready to channel their despair into destroying others to no obvious benefit in the face of overwhelming military force. Paradoxically, the violence of the Cross contradicts all dependency on violence. It's essential we remind ourselves on this holy day of Him who consciously chose to suffer for the sake of others, rather than impose suffering on others. "*It is necessary*", Jesus said; "*That the Son of the Man should suffer ...*"

The apostles speak of Him bearing our burden of sin on the Cross, of shouldering the violence of punishment so that the world may no more have to punish or be punished. Jesus took his inspiration from the Suffering Servant poetry of the prophet Isaiah. He identified with the figure called and blessed by God, of whom Isaiah spoke "*He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him. By his wounds we are healed.*" Jesus realised the logic of putting an end to the age old habit of retaliation, arresting the violent response with an act of forgiveness, bearing the pain of being sinned against, not requiring anyone else to be hurt. To sin is to cause suffering, to be sinned against is to undergo suffering. To experience betrayal, to be a crime victim, to be assaulted by malicious thoughts and intentions of another arouses our anger and emotional pain. It can be so strong as to affect us physically, like an injury. Have you ever experienced that? The loneliness, the desire for revenge, and punishment for our assailant which it awakens. It comes from the need to know that others feel what I am

feeling, therefore I cannot be so alone that I think I'm going to be annihilated.

As we follow Jesus in the travels of his ministry, we see how concerned he is to do something about people's suffering, by acts of healing, by accepting the rejected, by pardoning the guilty, raising up the downcast. His teaching like his deeds, declares that God wants everyone to be whole, freed from suffering, rejoicing in freedom, safe knowing they are loved and welcomed as God's children, no matter who they are.

He won't be deterred from proclaiming that the kingdom of God, God's reign, means just these things, that all practice of religion should serve this end - setting the world free from the suffering of sin, by practising healing and forgiveness.

Because he had such a clear and practical vision, he clashed with all those devout souls who took refuge from the reality of suffering in their religious piety. He called them hypocrites. Play actors, the word means. In this he comes close to consigning the conventional worship of his time to the domain of entertainment. And in this he is faithful to the spirit of Isaiah and other prophets *"Is not this the kind of fasting I choose: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"*

Jesus doesn't condemn religious ritual, but insists that it takes its meaning from doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with God in everyday affairs.

His actions and message must have seemed like a radical challenge, a threat to the established religious authorities who ran the Jerusalem Temple and its system of sacrifice. They believed this defined their identity as Jews, and their claim to own this land in which generations of Jews looked towards from all directions, to the Temple in Jerusalem as the centre of their world.

What would Wales be without its great Cathedrals. St David's, Bangor, Llandaff?

Secular society may be indifferent to what they stand for, apart from their history, but what about us, as believers? Don't we strive to retain them and their spiritual meaning as best we can, anxious not to lose the deeper value of our heritage?

Yet, if Jesus was with us, no matter how much delight he'd share with us in our sacred

buildings, his real interest and attention would be the poor, the deprived, those who suffer, in need of healing, peace, reconciliation. There are plenty of sufferers, as there ever was. We might even confuse his different interests with secularist indifference. When Jesus debated priorities with the scholars of the holy city he exposed their faults challenged their values. His attention was always on God on our need for God. Instead of awakening consciences among them, He aroused resentment. They began to consider how they could get rid of him.

Not long before his final entry into Jerusalem, Jesus was at Bethany where he'd raised his friend Lazarus to life from the tomb. It was a healing so dramatic, nobody could keep quiet about it. More began to follow him than ever. The authorities wondered how not to lose control of the situation.

*"What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." One of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! You do not realize? It is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." So from that day on they plotted to take his life."*

The story allows us to sense the fear expressed in their thoughts. Fear of losing their power, fear that violence would break out and destroy the nation they strived to hold together with their protective religious measures and control of small privileges. Can we see ourselves, faced with similar dilemmas? Who is this man, who has done no violence, yet arouses such fears in them, in us?

The voice of common sense declares it is expedient one man die, that the problem he causes by being who he is will soon be eliminated, and security restored. Now here is a practical doctrine which has stood the test of time, in every dictatorship, and in faith communities down the ages across the world. Ironically it always succeeds in being a useless failure. You can kill those who do the truth, but you can't kill truth. Truth will out, and will change the world, sooner or later.

Enter Judas Iscariot, reformed Zealot, in love with the words and deeds of Jesus. He has exchanged the terrorist mindset of despair for the promising vision of hope in

God, shown by Jesus. He realises this man who can change lives, can also change the world. He thinks he understands the action plan. He sees how much the leaders hate Jesus. If only he can bring them together with Him, He can show them convince them He has the power and authority to take the nation where its leaders want it to be.

Judas wants to be a power broker. But he's impatient with Jesus, on that evening at supper in Bethany when Mary anoints Jesus' feet in a surprise act of loving devotion. Jesus defends her against his criticism of wastefulness, appreciating the love this act represents. Judas fails to hear or comprehend what Jesus implies in speaking of this deed anticipating his burial. He's so ambitious he cannot accept, given Jesus' ability to work wonders, that the poor will be there always.

He lives in the land of illusion, where Satan tester of men leads him to seek a way to hand Jesus over to the authorities - Judas believes it'll make decisive confrontation possible. He's incapable of believing he's read the situation wrong. He acts in what he's sure is Jesus' best interests. The opposite of faith is certainty, rather than doubt. It's the same kind of certainty that possesses those who believe that violence can ever be a cure for violence, where the suicide bomber, or advocates of nuclear deterrence. In his awful certainty Judas is the most impoverished of men. Can you see him in yourself sometimes?