

REFLECTIONS ON THE ORLANDO MASSACRE

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The horrendous shooting of many innocent people in Orlando last Sunday is one more reminder of the brokenness of humanity and the ever-present propensity for evil to emerge in our society. Yet, apart from sociopaths and warmongers, most people desire to live in peace and safety as well as have the ability to find meaning and fulfilment in their lives.

To achieve this, we restrain ourselves by law and custom whilst also giving a few people permission to act on our behalf to 'keep the peace'. Of course, this hope ends with a jolt when a person (or group of people) decides to act against the interests of peace and justice. This happened last Sunday when Omar Mateen took an assault weapon to a nightclub, shooting dead 49 people and wounding many others. The ripple effect of this crime will spread across the world for some time.

The speculations as to what motivated him to do this are diverse, and often have a socio-political edge. As information emerges we are discovering that the situation is complex. What is clear is that a crime was meted out upon a group of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people (LGBTI) and their friends who had gathered at the Pulse Nightclub. Here a particular group of people was singled out for devastation – a minority group that has been on the receiving end of much persecution down through history.

What causes someone to act in this way? The default position seems to be to claim that they are insane. In other words, if they were in their right mind they would not have done it; however, this argument seems to ignore the possibility that people can act in a despicable manner by choice. If someone has sufficient motivation (say homophobia), the means (a weapon), and belief in the legitimacy of their actions (a political or religious ideology), then it is unsurprising that such atrocities happen. It is similar to the 2011 case of Anders Breivik in Norway.

If we are to address such violent behaviour it is necessary to address these three factors of motivation, means and legitimation. We tend to achieve this through education, the law, and an ethical underpinning of society and its values. In Australia there have been attempts to provide education about LGBTI issues (such as Safe Schools), but too often they have been blocked by conservative political groups. There have been attempts to give LGBTI people equality under the law, and while some things have changed, there are still problems in the areas of the recognition of partners, next of kin, and property rights. There have been some changes in the ethics surrounding the treatment of LGBTI people in the community, but negative attitudes (including homophobia) persist – often as the result of the actions of political and religious groups.

A glaringly obvious issue in the United States is the need for control of the "means" of these atrocities, which would mean a change to the gun laws. According to the Gun Violence Archive, up to June 12th there had been 132 mass shooting incidents in the United States in 2016. Indeed, the Pulse Nightclub massacre was the fifteenth multiple shooting in Florida and the fourth in Orlando in 2016. More staggering is that over 6,000 people have died from gun injuries in the United States during this time. In modern parlance the solution is a 'no-brainer'; but no, Congress continues to allow it to happen. Australia has done much better in this regard.

Religious and political groups also have much to answer for regarding society's attitudes towards LGBTI people. The condemnation, judgementalism and vilification that have often been directed toward homosexual people are a cause for shame. Such behaviour tends to create and maintain a culture of negativity toward a group of people who, like all people, are as they are because of nature and not choice. Too often through history we have seen political and religious ideologies attempt to override the findings of science and deny reality. This is another example of the curse of fundamentalism.

Likewise, the condemnation of minorities, the marginalised and powerless for political expediency usually drives society into deeds of conflict, persecution and sometimes death. Human groups (and tribes) enhance their own identities by the identification of enemies that provide examples of what the groups are not. Enemies can become the focus of all that is both feared and detested – even those things that are present in ourselves but that we would rather deny. For this reason we vilify refugees, immigrants, ethnic and racial groups, women, and people of different religions.

For a society to be healthy, differences need to be acknowledged and respected, and diversity encouraged. At the same time the binding forces of the law and a shared ethos need to be recognised. We have both freedoms and restrictions on our behaviour at the same time, while also recognising and respecting real differences in opinions, practices, or beliefs between groups. Nevertheless, freedom of speech is about the choice to engage in debate, not the right to malign others.

How might we respond in these circumstances? First, it would be wise to be humble and prudent about our commentary – words can hurt, words can encourage people to act, words inform attitudes and can justify actions. Secondly, we might show compassion and mourn together as a common humanity. Thirdly, as Christians, we should seek to live out and proclaim God's unconditional love for all people – even those we are tempted to hate. Finally, we might seek a fairer and more just society for LGBTI people so that all may live in safety and with dignity.

As the Archbishops of Canterbury and York wrote last Monday:

"After Sunday's attack in Orlando as Christians we must speak out in support of LGBTI people, who have become the latest group to be so brutally targeted by the forces of evil. We must pray, weep with those affected, support the bereaved, and love without qualification.

The obligation to object to these acts of persecution, and to support those LGBTI people who are wickedly and cruelly killed and wounded, bereaved and traumatised, whether in Orlando or elsewhere, is an absolute call on our Christian discipleship. It arises from the unshakeable certainty of the gracious love of God for every human being.

Now, in this time of heartbreak and grief, is a time for solidarity. May God our Father give grace and comfort to all who mourn, and divine compassion to us all."

A Prayer for Orlando:

Compassionate God and Father of all,
we are horrified by violence in so many parts of the world.
It seems that none are safe, and some are terrified.
Hold back the hands that kill and maim; turn around the hearts that hate.
Grant instead your strong spirit of peace
– peace that passes our understanding but changes lives;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

(The Church of England website)