Violence

What motivates the playground bully? A desire for power? Perhaps he’s being abused at home and is lashing out for revenge. He wants to see a non-conforming weakling suffer. Perhaps he hasn’t the intellectual ability to win arguments by any other means. Perhaps it’s an outpouring of primitive aggression that drives many animals to fight for survival.

Violence is certainly on the menu in parliament this week. Shouldn’t we show solidarity with our allies by bombing Syria? Some MP’s supporting action others saying they prefer to try to win ‘hearts and minds’, cynics thinking that the hearts and minds of terrorist cells are not for turning.

In one blog I read David Hirsh arguing that ‘the right thing is to stand with the Kurds, the Jews, the Yazidis, the gay men, the girls in school in their fight against fascism. Not to stand aloof out of fear that Daesh (ISIL) will get cross with us.’ In another from Rick Pearce, ‘I'm fed up to the ears with old men dreaming up wars for young men to die in.’ (George. S. McGovern)

And then, in a Prospect review of a book on Joseph Conrad, the admirable Clive James saying: ‘Conrad knew that unarmed goodwill is useless against armed malice…peace is not a principle, it is only a desirable state of affairs, and can’t be obtained without a capacity for violence at least equal to the violence of the threat.’

The vox pop on the BBC website this morning shows about two thirds of those interviewed supporting air strikes, out of a sense of nervousness and the feeling that something has to be done.

Whichever side you take – to bomb or not to bomb – I find it very hard to see that bombing is strategically very clever. Many people are saying, ‘OK, so you bomb Syria, but what comes next? What’s your next move?’ And that very pertinent question isn’t being answered. Terrorist activists don’t care if a load of people get bombed or buildings destroyed, beside they’re already doing that themselves. They simply know that while bombing makes us feel good they feel even more justified in infiltrating our cities and causing mayhem.

World leaders need to work out a plan that incorporates a peace process rather than a retaliatory blunt edged bombing campaign, with no idea where to go after that. Or if they do know what comes next, then to share it with us so that there is purpose and shape to our response. No one thinks that we should sit back and do nothing, because the logic of that is that we’d all end up ruled by a repressive caliphate centred on a macabre cult of death.

Then we come to church on Advent Sunday, a time of hope and looking forward, only to hear one of the most disturbing passages in the New Testament about the Second Coming and the end of the world. If you recall, Mark was the source of much material for Matthew and Luke and his prior version of this text says: ‘When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs…someone in the field must not turn back to get a coat. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not be in winter. For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now.’

But there is a plan in all this chaos, Christ will enter at his second coming and bring redemption, gathering up the faithful. It’s not such good news for the rest of humanity. Maybe, one of the things that the story recognises is that there is a kind of violence innate to creation itself. From the Big Bang onwards massive forces have exploded into a universe and a solar system that is able to sustain life and we live on the edge of that natural violence with the force of the sea, earthquakes, eruptions, winds, lightning and floods and extreme temperatures. That’s not to defend violence, but to note that it’s in our DNA and perhaps that the work of civilisation, and indeed religious ethics, has been to control and order violence and to try to make sense of it.

Since Biblical times we have of course also developed a psychological critique: Impulsive versus instrumental aggression. The crime of passion is impulsive and the murderer is unlikely to strike again; the murder committed in the process of a robbery is instrumental, much more calculated, it serves a purpose and the murderer is likely to strike again if he judges it necessary. But we also try to understand what’s going on in the mind of an unsociably violent person and usually give some explanation that can look like defence of their behaviour. Psychopaths show predominantly instrumental aggression, as they use aggression coldly, as a means of controlling others. They are likely to continue aggressive acts despite conviction and punishment, and they are over-represented in prison populations. A victim or traumatised person might show more emotional aggression and so on. The point is, and of course I am no expert, they are hitting out in desperation and what might be called emotional self-defence. Generally speaking war is in the instrumental category, judged a last resort, calculated to repel a major political threat.

I know I’ve bitten off much more than I can chew this morning. This is a subject for a career, let alone a sermon. But there’s another proposition that has thrown some light onto the Christian theology of violence and it is the anthropologist Rene Girard’s theory of mimetic desire. Girard died just a couple of weeks ago. Mimesis sounds complicated, but it’s just a way of saying that we copy one another. Someone hits you, you hit them back. You bomb us, we bomb you back. He argues that conflict results from mimetic rivalry: ISIL commits acts of terrorism as a tit for tat because the French are bombing Syria. Putin’s new reason form bombing Syria is that a Russian airplane was downed. Now he’s working out how to get back at Turkey for shooting down one of his fighter jets. Violence becomes contagious and escalates, so that in the end the combatants begin to look very much like each other.

Girard says that this crescendo of violence is usually defused by the use of a scapegoat, diverting violence on to a weak and innocent victim. Strangely and weirdly everyone’s aggression can be purged by the lonely suffering of this substitute victim. If it sounds familiar, then of course it’s an idea that stands at the centre of the Christian story: behold the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. It’s not something that Girard admires.

But how does it work for Christians? I think we can see it more illuminatingly in a fresh take on the Sermon on the Mount. You remember those key iconic texts: Turn the other cheek, go the extra mile. Critics of this ethic say that it’s like a dog rolling over and accepting defeat, a man cowering in the face of evil, not standing up for what is right, moral cowardice. But you can also read that text as moral courage: an obstinate challenge to the aggressor: ‘You expect me to hit you back, (in a mimetic way) but I challenge you to hit me on the other cheek’. Or to the Roman soldier: ‘you have forced me to carry your kit for a mile as if I were nobody, now I’m going to carry it another mile and you will put up with my company.’ So this is not moral passivity, you are not accepting abuse, not allowing yourself to be trampled over. You might say it’s a refusal to be defined by the violent other, a refusal to answer back in kind. There was a brilliant example of this after the Paris shootings, when Antoine Leiris posted a message to those who murdered his wife: “You will not have my hatred.”

So I conclude with a both and. Justice and mercy. Physically standing against evil but also not allowing ourselves to be defined by the violent other. Yesterday I saw Shakespeare’s Henry V, a play that considers the themes of justice and mercy, of mercy and summary justice. There’s a scene, you remember before Agincourt, where the King, unrecognised, meets Williams and ordinary soldier, and they exchange gloves as tokens. If they survive and meet again Williams say he will strike the glove that the unrecognised king wears. Well, of course, they do meet. To strike the King is high treason, demanding summary execution.

Williams pleads: Yours majesty came not like yourself: you appeared to me but as a common man…therefore I beseech you highness, pardon me.

The King replies: Here, uncle Exeter, fill this glove with crowns, And give it to this fellow. Keep it, fellow, and wear it for an honour in thy cap.

And they embrace in one of the truly emotional moments in the play.