

## After the Norwegian Massacre, Sunday July 24<sup>th</sup> 2011

As we all know, some dreadful things happened in Norway on Friday. Over 90 people callously murdered near the heart of that clean and courteous and peaceful nation. And in the midst of the sorrow we feel for all those caught up in it a sense of horror and of shame that it was – apparently – done, in part, out of some sort of religious, Christian, motive. How can this be? How can someone do something like this in the belief that it pleases a God of love or embodies the spirit of Jesus Christ? I cringe with sorrow and shame.

The murderer is said to be a Christian fundamentalist. I ask myself what this means. It's a catch-all description that seems to stretch from people of naive but allegedly harmless biblical literalism to psychopaths with tunnel vision. Studies show that those labelled fundamentalist usually see themselves as the only true believers in an ocean of sin and unbelief; those who must protect a divine doctrine, a vital principle, the sole way of life and salvation. It's been said that fundamentalists in Christianity, Judaism and Islam 'are united by a common worldview which anchors all of life in the authority of the sacred, and a shared ethos that expresses itself through outrage at the pace and extent of modern secularization'. So what we might call the 'wall of virtue', which protects their identity, is erected not only against the world at large, and other religions, but also against what they see as a modernized, nominal version of their own religion. In Christianity, fundamentalists are often known as 'born again' or 'Bible-believing' Christians, as opposed to 'mainline', 'liberal', or 'modernist' Christians who presumably haven't been born again and don't believe the Bible.

As a crumb of the coldest comfort we can acknowledge that fundamentalism isn't of itself a religious phenomenon, although there are secularists who are desperate to maintain that it is. We find it, do we not, in all realms of life where self-proclaimed purists (including secularists) oppose those they label traitors or appeasers. We've seen it in politics of the extreme right and left; we've seen it in the arts, in the world of science – always there are those who believe that they alone bear the living torch of truth, and fear and oppose the rest. The trouble is – part of the tragedy – that religion is often conscripted into this, called upon to provide a reason and clothing for issues or campaigns that are utterly repugnant to its true heart.

Where Friday's Norwegian murderer falls within all of this I don't know. I do know that when the July 7<sup>th</sup> bombings took place in London in 2005 the Islamic community in Britain was told to put its house in order – to preach and teach its true values more clearly and firmly, to crack down on those who taught strange or noxious versions of that faith, to recognize that there were those in their community particularly vulnerable to fundamentalist teaching and to care specially for them. This may be a message that we need to take to heart ourselves.

One of the things that seems to prompt those who are vulnerable to fundamentalist teaching is a sense that members of mainstream churches are nominal believers, people with a passing interest but whose hearts and lives seem not to have been touched very deeply. A watered down version of the thing, not the full strength. Then they come upon those who seem zealous in the faith, and it appears to be the real deal. I believe there are many misconceptions behind that view, misconceptions about faith and culture, about appearance and reality, about maturity and immaturity.

Yet, at the same time, I'm left with the uncomfortable feeling that there's a personal truth I'm avoiding here. How visible is my Christianity? How much does it inform my attitudes and actions in any meaningful way? If I'm to take some responsibility for keeping vulnerable brothers and sisters out of harm's way I must ask myself whether the relative invisibility of my faith isn't part of their problem. If my life set before

them, in a more public way, an open and accepting and committed living out of the Gospel, then they would have an alternative full-strength version of the Christian faith to learn from.

We hear too that the Norwegian murderer is said to have connections with far right political organizations. Regrettably, there seems sometimes to be a link between fundamentalist Christianity and the hard right. I remember not very long ago seeing that so-called pastor in Florida, the Koran-burning Terry Jones, interviewed on television with a gun – a loaded gun – next to the Bible on his desk. Not a surprise, I think, that he has devoted a lot of energy to denouncing the liberal policies of the local mayor and his staff. But if we look back to the 1980s we can recall the Moral Majority in the United States, part of the surge of interest in politics by organized fundamentalists there in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and it's a tendency which continues to exert powerful influence. Yet it's very difficult to understand why people who make such great claims to be 'saved', to 'know Jesus' and to base their entire thinking and life on what is written in the Scriptures, should so neglect the teaching of the prophets, and Jesus' own teaching on the Kingdom of God, as to be able to accept, without question, prejudices and policies that oppress other races or minorities, or look to crude militarism as a means of solving all problems. As so often – and we see this with regard to gender issues – people actually pick and choose which bits of scripture they find congenial, and interpret and apply them as narrowly as possible, whilst ignoring other bits altogether. It's not something within scripture that's determining this, it's something within the people themselves – so let's be red hot about homosexuality but stone cold about justice for the migrant worker living in our midst!

If we would put our house in order so that waverers can see in us an attractive and viable alternative to far right fundamentalism, we need, I suggest, to be far more active in preaching – and actually embodying and living – values of the Kingdom of God. Let the fundamentalist option be seen for what it is: an emaciated and pathetically twisted parody of the fullness of God's Kingdom, of the 'Shalom' of justice, mercy, peace and outgoing loving blessing that speaks of Christ himself in our midst.

I thought that this bombing and shooting in the name of God was all done by Islamic fundamentalists today, not Christians – or if it was done by Christians it was people on the lunatic fringe outside abortion clinics in the south of the United States. But now it's here; a mass murder in Europe. I thought it was all far away culturally or geographically. Well, I think again with sorrow and shame this weekend, and I see that if it's getting this close I can't shrug my shoulders any longer.

What I am as a Christian may be part of the problem. What I should be as a Christian may be part of the solution.