

# *Worship and Violence*



The picture above is of our chapel in the octave of Easter. It is a place where we Sisters gather daily for times of worship, and can go individually to pray to God. It is a safe place where we can praise God, pray for the needs of others and ourselves, rest in God's presence and tell God how we are feeling. It is also where God often comforts and challenges us.

Muslims at Friday prayers in Christchurch, New Zealand, and Christians on Easter Day in Colombo, Sri Lanka have recently experienced worship together as a time of violence and death.

We know that we can pray to God anywhere and at any time, but to pray together, and in a place which has been filled with the prayers of the faithful in the past, can assist us in the present. Having such a place of worship reminds us that there is a power greater than ourselves that loves us and all creation, and is ultimately in control of everything.

The Qur'an opens with the words (an English translation), "Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds, The Beneficent, the Merciful." In the Gospel of Luke 6:27 Jesus instructed his followers, "Love your enemies, do good to those that hate you." and in v.36, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." None of these words excite violence.

In Mark 11:15 Jesus became angry when he saw money changers and traders in the temple selling animals for sacrifices. This was the only time Jesus is recorded as being violent. He was not trying to kill or injure anyone but to drive out the people and their animals from the Court of the Gentiles. Jesus, a Jew, wanted non-Jews, Gentiles, to be able to worship God in their particular place in the temple. This was especially important at Passover time. Jesus was enabling *more* people to worship God, not less.

For Christians, praying to God is an essential part of our lives, therefore we can understand the importance of prayer for Muslims. Prayer is to do with relationships, something outside of ourselves. These relationships are primarily with God but immediately flow over to include other people, ourselves and the whole of creation.

When we pray together we do it on behalf of our world. We can give thanks for the many beautiful and wonderful things we see around us in nature, and the loving actions of nations and individual people to help those in need. We also ask God for the healing of so many people and places in our world where there is pain, suffering, acts of violence, hate and retribution. We can bring before God our concerns for refugees held by Australia in off-shore detention centres, members of minority groups fleeing from persecution in their own countries and victims of domestic violence.

Our prayer can be expressed in many ways. It may be in words, music, singing, moving our bodies, eating, weeping or silence. Perhaps silence allows for the most powerful form of prayer. It is when we do not direct God's action but unite ourselves to God's will for particular people or situations in our world. Jesus was mostly silent on the cross.

At this point I want to ask, why would anyone want to kill and injure people gathered for prayer, and in the case of bombers, kill themselves in the process? Where is respect for ourselves and fellow human beings? Where is reverence

for people praying to the God they love, and who loves them and gives meaning and purpose to their lives?

From a practical point of view, attacking a group of people, mostly facing in one direction and focused on doing something non-violent, is a cruel and cowardly act. Such violence has been explained as expressions of hate against Muslims in mosques in Christchurch, and Christians and 'white' people in churches and hotels in Colombo. Do these murderers see themselves as 'heroes' for killing people at worship? Can such violence really be a step towards eradicating Islam or Christianity in our world? It seems senseless—to me.

How are we, who want peace, justice and well-being for all, to respond to these acts? We cannot meet violence with violence, nor can we live in fear of becoming targets of people's hate when we worship together. Some immediate positive actions, which have already been embraced, is to forgive perpetrators, and grieve with and support victims who are suffering in Sri Lanka and New Zealand. This is not easy. We also need to try to be more accepting and caring of others who worship God in a different way from us. They are human beings; men, women and children who work and play - just like us in so many ways.

As Christians we can speak up publicly for the many Muslims who are not terrorists, but are often condemned. We may also learn reverence from Muslims, who when they say 'Jesus', (whom they honour as a prophet of God) follow it with the words, 'peace be upon him'. It is a decided improvement from using the name of Jesus carelessly or as a swear word!

Finally, Jesus commanded us, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). For Muslims, Mohammed wrote in the Hadith, "None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself." (67-1, no. 45.) Can we Christians witness, by our worship and lives, to loving one another as Jesus loves us (John 13:34)?

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