

ON THE CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLENCE¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, at Choral Matins on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, 28 April 2024

I want to say something about the consequences of violence. Leaving aside the rest of the world, we, in Sydney, and at St James, find ourselves in a confused and confusing set of circumstances. We are nearing the end of the Easter season, a period that began with an act of state terrorism in the death of Jesus. On Thursday, we celebrated Anzac Day, an event that is centred on the wars that we have fought. We cannot yet forget the events at Bondi and Wakeley, where possibly mentally ill individuals committed public acts of violence and where, after one of those acts, public rioting broke out. Also in the public eye, and not yet over, is the defamation case brought by Bruce Lehmann. Every time such a court case is on television, we see our building in the background. We know also that the Bondi assailant targeted women. Attacks on women are a daily occurrence, with deaths rising to 26 so far this year.

In the Easter celebrations, we acknowledge both the death of Jesus and the resurrection victory that followed. We pin our faith on that victory, but we know that its full realisation is yet to come. On Anzac Day, we recognise the sacrifice of our armed services, both past and present. We may wish to pretend that taking a positive approach on Anzac Day will replace the negative effects of active service, but we know that that is not true.

The Bondi killings produced heroic responses in citizens going about their Saturday business in a shopping mall, but we know that no amount of heroism wipes out the event itself. At Wakeley, we saw violence on violence that we reject from start to finish but we know that those responses arose from deep-seated experiences in a refugee community.

There is no doubt that many people emerged from the Bondi Westfield deeply traumatised. Their reactions will vary, and the personal effects may last for years. If people left Bondi traumatised, people came to Wakeley already traumatised. Minority religions in Iraq have been subject to persecution for a long time, persecution heightened when the country was besieged by ISIS. Those who fled witnessed murder and destruction on a large scale. They feared the former government of Saddam Hussein even before ISIS emerged. The online appearance of an apparent Muslim assault activated deeply held emotions. They feared the resurgence of historic persecution and they distrusted government.

An article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Saturday 20 April 2024, quoted a Deakin University academic who explained how the honour-based culture of the Middle East led the responses. Honour is something that can be lost. When it is lost, action is required to retrieve it. Our European culture is more guilt-based. Guilt is something you acquire and must be shaken off or atoned for. If honour provoked the Wakeley crowd, guilt provoked us to label the Bondi and Wakeley alleged offenders as mentally ill or terrorist, both of which now appear true.

Religious leaders responded quickly. Encouraged by the Premier, they unequivocally, through their spokesperson, our bishop, Michael Stead, denounced the Wakeley violence. That was

¹ Readings: Psalm 99; Isaiah 60:1-14; Matthew 5:38-48

appropriate but I doubt that the most violent of the crowd acted as they did because they thought that their leaders had approved what they were doing. Religious leaders also responded to the Bondi massacre but with much less publicity.

What we may clearly draw from all these events is that violence breeds violence. The question is how, apart from shock and horror, we, as Christians, respond to the ever-present violence of our world. That is why I asked for our New Testament reading this morning to be from the Sermon on the Mount. This section is about non-violence, about not responding to violence in the same kind.

As Tom Wright comments, in this reading:

Jesus offers a new sort of justice, a creative, healing, restorative justice. The old justice found in the Bible was designed to prevent revenge running away with itself. Better an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth than an escalating feud with each side going one worse than the other. But Jesus goes one better still. Better to have no vengeance at all, but rather a creative way forward ...²

Wright reminds us that the Sermon on the Mount is not about us but about Jesus. What it contains is what Jesus did, especially at the end. This is not a handbook for better living but about discovering the living God in Jesus. If it were such a handbook, we could dismiss it as idealism and find excuses not to follow it. This brings us back to the Easter message.

Stanley Hauerwas makes a similar point:

We are called, therefore, to be perfect, but perfection names our participation in Christ's love of his enemies. Perfection does not mean that we are sinless or that we are free of anger or lust. Rather, to be perfect is to learn to be part of a people who take the time to live without resorting to violence to sustain their existence.³

In his commentary, Hauerwas relies heavily on the World War II Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. And we need to remember that, in the end, Bonhoeffer found himself so opposed to the Nazi regime that he allegedly participated in a conspiracy to kill Hitler. This is ostensibly why he was executed, although his opposition to the Nazi regime was more complex and nuanced than that. Whatever the truth about his involvement in the plot, he consistently acted against the Third Reich.⁴ Following Jesus is never straightforward or easy.

Our task as Christians is not, however, to rule the world. Christendom is long gone. Our task is to accept our role as citizens and to do it through living a life that demonstrates the love of God in Jesus. Although our history in this endeavour has frequently demonstrated failure, the call remains.⁵

We will now sing Charles Wesley's hymn "Forth in thy name, O Lord I go". It is a hymn for the beginning of a day and reflects our task:

The task thy wisdom hath assigned,
O let me cheerfully fulfill;

² Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*: Chapter 1-15, Part 1 (p. 50). SPCK.

³ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible): (p. 72). Baker Publishing Group.

⁴ [viewcontent.cgi \(whitworth.edu\)](http://viewcontent.cgi (whitworth.edu))

⁵ [Pilgrimage to nonviolence | The Christian Century](#)

in all my works thy presence find,
and prove thy good and perfect will.

Thee may I set at my right hand;
Whose eyes mine inmost substance see,
and labour on at thy command
and offer all my works to thee.



The Disrobing of Christ (El Expolio) (1579)
El Greco (1541-1614)
Sacristy of Toledo Cathedral