

On Wednesday, Fr Laurence and I had been invited to lunch at Islamia Girls School so that we might share a meal together, before the start of Ramadan, but also so we could just spend some time being together, enjoying each other's company and enjoying conversation. And we did!

Then later, in a sort of unrelated way, we received an email which was forward to all faith leaders in Brent from Sohail Ahmed, who works at the Wembley Central Mosque in Ealing Road. He was sharing thoughts sent through from a colleague of his in Manchester

It was a letter in two parts, one addressed to Muslims, reminding them not to be fearful, not to let go of the truth they know about their faith which is not reflected in acts of violence; and the calling the Muslim Community of Manchester and beyond to pray and to trust. It was a very moving start. The next part of the letter read as follows...

Dear non-Muslims:

I know how difficult it can be to have faith in your neighbours and fellow Muslim citizens when all of your senses around you are telling you something different. We wish we could change the narrative that is presented to you, but we're struggling. You have to believe us that your Muslim friend, colleague, employee, boss and just general fellow citizen is at his or her's wit's end on how to get rid of these cursed terrorists from our lives.

I agree with you. We can't just blame foreign policy, or their personal social circumstances or whatever. There is an undoubted intentional desire to distort Islam for the Terrorists' own hideous ideology, even if there wasn't a single possible grievance in the world. We just have to trust the security services to bring these perpetrators to justice just as they protect us every day from daily failed attacks, and we trust behind the scenes our scholars and leaders to continue guiding the lost out of this criminal insanity just like the many they have saved without the public ever being aware of it.

*My friends, there are no short-cuts in dealing with the grief in our city and it is a priority, but the Muslims need your support too. Please realise the *huge* impact of a word of reassurance and solidarity, with a people who are exactly like you but have a different colour or faith. They are DESPERATE to help, but many will be paralyzed by this horrific tragedy and don't know how to respond. We have NOTHING to do with these evil vermin but then we have everything to do with them in the eyes of the masses, and that's what creates more fear and division.*

To Everyone:

Lives have been changed forever. What the rest of us must do is to not let the terrorists define the narrative that follows. Our response of love and unity right now is the worst possible result for these scum, so let's give it to them in buckets¹.

¹ Sohail Ahmed, who works at the Wembley Central Mosque in Ealing Road.

The first time I read the letter through I was a little overwhelmed – how do we hold the horror of this week in prayer while at the same time celebrate the great feast of the Ascension. How do we hold onto hope? I was also mindful, that for our immediate neighbours, this year our festival coincides with the start of Ramadan.

But what struck me most as I had read the Iman's letter, apart from the absolute desire for things to be different – to create a new narrative - was the his reminder that what neighbours, what we all need at this time - is reassurance and solidarity. And it is that which holds together that we come in prayer for today.

Today as we mark the end of our Easter Journey in the Feast of the Ascension, a time that reminds us of Jesus movement from Earth to Heaven – we start by being reminded of the disciples' vulnerability – their humanity. A committed group of followers who had faithfully journeyed with Jesus in his life, have come to not only know him but to trust and believe in the power of God have now witnessed his death. An event that even with all their faith would have broken them. They had not only lost a friend in death; but they also had to come to terms with the fact that Jesus execution meant that their lives, their beliefs too were now under threat. This constant need to be vigilant that they would be next would have been exhausting but also meant they knew vulnerability in a way that many of us thankfully never will. They knew what it meant to be under constant surveillance - to know that many wanted you dead.

And then in the midst of this reality Jesus rises from the dead and appears to them, and encourages them once more to face their fears, to embrace their vulnerability and to have the courage and convictions of their faith to keep believing in God. Then after Jesus had spent time with them, he opens the scriptures to them and prepares them to understand that in the end they will not be left alone, God will send the spirit to be with them – and they will be able to trust in the spirit who will be God them in their lives. And when they are prepared Jesus is taken up. In one account they watch him ascend, in the other a cloud takes him from their sight and two men in white robes appear and address them. In Luke's gospel account the disciples then bow down and worship.

The disciples would relate well to many of the feelings many in this nation would have been feeling this week. Despair, anger, frustration, vulnerability, fear. They were a community under siege; and yet before Jesus ascension he spends time with the disciples in solidarity, helping them to see that God understands and is with them, but most importantly in the led up to his ascension Jesus spends his limited time reassuring this disciples. He reminds them of what they know, of what he has taught them, of what they have seen, and heard and experienced. What a wonderful gift. It is a gift that we should also embrace that God is within us.

But the biggest reassurance that Jesus gives is that the spirit will come and live in our midst. Sadly there is little that fleshes out what this might mean. Paul of course

talks about gifts of the spirit and the nurturing of them. But sometimes there seems little written that might help us understand this important relationship. Early Theologians also have a tough time helping us to embrace what this gift means in terms of our understanding of God at times. Theologian Elizabeth Johnson says, “Perhaps at the end of their long treatises, they simply got tired.” Sometimes, they forgot about the Holy Spirit all together. “This is a shame,” says Johnson, “for what is being neglected is nothing less than the mystery of God’s personal engagement with the world ... the mystery of God closer to us than we are to ourselves.”²

The Spirit is something rather than nothing. Look at the life of Jesus to see where the Spirit has been. And when the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples, he said: “Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” From now on, Jesus says, I will be with you in the power of the Spirit. Though I am leaving, you will not be left alone. This is staying power.³

Jesus is introducing his own new narrative – the mystery and the personal engagement of God in the world is the spirit. It is ever-present in our midst – even if like the disciples we feel vulnerable and afraid; even when we are confused about who our neighbours might be; or how we engage with the devastation of the past week; Jesus final narrative reminds us that God’s spirit, God’s healing spirit is breaking with us; and is with us in our grief.

The Iman who wrote to the Manchester community reminded us all that we need not let the evil of a few, or our own fears and vulnerabilities define who we are as a community and a nation. Jesus said the same thing to the disciples – do not let your fear or uncertainty define you – rather wait here for the spirit who will help to define you and always guide you.

The Spirit that anointed Jesus anoints us, still breathes with us and surprises us. Still reshapes the community called the church. If we forget and imagine that we’re in this all by ourselves, if we trust only in our own efforts, we may lose sight of God in our midst – or even of the comfort and strength which God is holding us.

The next 7 days – the period between the Ascension and Pentecost – is a profound and often under-valued time in the church calendar – but it is a time when we too like the disciples focus our minds and our prayers on the need for the life of the spirit in the world today. Even before the events of the last week – the Archbishops of Canterbury and York had called the world to pray for the coming of God’s Kingdom. To pray for the peace of the world, and the solidarity, mystery and intimacy which is offered with God in the spirit. This is now even more poignant. There has never been a more important time to pray; and bigger need to long for, and share God’s spirit in the world – to help us share Jesus narrative of love and compassion for our neighbours and within our community.

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2850

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2850

Ascension Sunday – 28th May 2017
Acts 1: 1-11 Ephesians 1: 15-end and Luke 24: 44-end

We like the disciples, need to not be defined by our pain, or by the vision of Jesus leaving – but rather inspired by the promise of the spirit arriving, we must pray – and pray that we might all have the courage to encounter and trust God's spirit which calls us to love. And let us remember that only love can break down fear and division – and we can only do this in the power of God, through prayer. Amen.