THE NEW SHOFAR

Trust the past to the mercy of God, the present to His love, and the future to His providence. **Saint Augustine**

Advent 4

***And there was silence in heaven* :Revelation 8:1**

Every now and then there is something so heinous, so inexplicable that even heaven pauses. One such event was the evil that manifested itself on the beauty and peaceful sands of Bondi beach. It was so shocking that heaven itself was stunned into silence. For *half an hour*. It is not that this shooting was unique in human history, but that this time it was in our own backyard. Just down the road, at a place Australians have been gathering for family moments of happiness and love for generations. It is now tarnished by Evil. But why? Where was God?

This is a question we all ask at some point in our lives and it can become the chief obstacle to faith. We all suffer. Our bodies are frail, they will fail us, and we will die. And until we do, we all tiptoe around a pit of tragedy, every single day. A mass shooting kills dozens. A drunk driver kills a whole family. An earthquake destroys a village. What sort of world is this?

How do you respond to such a thing?

It is for this reason many people deny the depth of God's goodness. Maybe God is all-powerful, but He just does not care as much as we would like. He rules with an iron hand, but He does so as one who is distant and aloof from His creation. Both Islam and Buddhism in various ways reflect something of this view.

The Bible declares that evil is far worse than we realise. Evil is a parasite, a rot. It is a malignant cancer that has spread, a rupture in the cosmic order. Evil is so real that it has a personal focus — a focus in the one Jesus called the Devil — the one who stands opposed to the purposes of God and all that is good, true, and beautiful. The good material world God created has been corrupted. The root of evil in this world is not material, it is moral. It is found in rebellion against God's good rule. And from the beginning of humanity we have all participated in that rebellion so that evil is embodied in hearts. Others have gone further and drunk deeply from these evil beverages and are driven by evil, consumed by it and set out to pour it forth into the world by what they say and what they do. Such men were at Bondi beach.

At the same time, the Bible affirms that God is far more loving than we could ever hope. Though God could rightly do away with us all, in His love and mercy, He seeks us out to save us from the evil in this world and from the evil in ourselves. And in the gospel, we see that God shares in our suffering even as He acts to bring victory over evil. The cross and resurrection of Jesus become God's own response to evil in this world. Despite the worst that people could do to him, he

overcame evil, forgave the wicked, defeated death and rose to life, a life in which we are invited to share.

God works in mysterious ways to work out His good purpose, but there is one thing He wants us to understand clearly. The struggle with evil and suffering in this fallen world is only temporary. For God has already won the decisive battle in this war, and His ultimate and complete victory is absolutely certain. And if the cross of Jesus Christ shows us that our God shares in our suffering, then the resurrection of Jesus Christ demonstrates that God's triumph over evil is assured.

Though we can never give a full explanation of evil in this world, we do have God's response to it. At the end of this age, when Jesus comes again in glory, our God will show Himself to be fully and completely just when "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4). The Bible reveals a God Who is worthy of our trust even in the midst of our pain.

Love overcomes all things

To attempt to water down the mind-boggling evil of what happened at Bondi by simply speaking of a God who loves unconditionally is not going to heal the hurt and anger that reverberates around Australia at the moment. All of that is true, but we have come face to face with Evil. Those men were evil. The religious philosophies driving them were evil and had nothing to do with God. Indeed, any god encouraging men and women to do evil to others is no god at all. The same goes for any movement that sees any group of human beings, all who have been created in the image and likeness of God, as being less than human, as worthy of destruction is little less than Satanic in origin.

While we Christians call upon the supporters of these men to repent, to acknowledge this evil among them, we at the same time celebrate the grace of God that was also being manifested in the nightmare events. There were acts of heroism, courageous acts of love and compassion, people willing to risk their own lives to care for others. There are the love responses and generous acts of charity from both Australians and others around the world to show that Evil is always outweighed and overcome by the power of love.

It is only after weeping with them and for them that we can then offer that most Christian of gifts: Hope. Satan can do what he likes in and through these terrorists, but they can never permanently destroy, never stop God's plans for salvation from bearing fruit in creation. That answer is on our immediate horizon, in the words of the prophet Isaiah. God has given us the sign from which our hope springs - *the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel (God-with-us).* This is not a vague promise of some reward of 72 virgins in heaven, but a God who has become incarnate, and dwells among us.