

## HAS EVERYTHING CHANGED?

### Reformation Sunday, 2014: Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

It was Wednesday evening of this week. I had been away from the news media all day, but had heard through friends of the morning's shooting and subsequent death of Corporal Nathan Cirillo at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Ottawa, his assassin's breaching security in the Centre Block of the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa, and finally the shooting death of the attacker, Michael Zehaf-Bibeau by Parliament's Sergeant-at-Arms, Kevin Vickers. As had many in our congregation, I had attended the ceremony, Wednesday evening, honouring Lutheran Bishop Munib Younan at the Centre for International Governance Innovation. But I slipped out after Bishop Younan's speech in order to be home in time for the 10 o'clock news. I needed a more comprehensive take on what had happened than I could tease out from the CBC News app on my phone. That night on television, and then on the radio the next day, I heard the phrase over and over again from several different politicians, "This changes everything!" Interestingly, they did not elaborate much on the statement, but it seemed as if the speakers were indicating something like a loss of innocence for Canada.

Whether or not Michael Zehaf-Bibeau was part of a terrorist organization, the attack, first on a member of Canada's military and then on Canada's seat of power, the Federal Government, was an act of terrorism as the word has been defined over the past number of years. And in fact, the word "terrorism" has gained considerable emotional and psychological weight for North Americans and others ever since it was redefined by the events of September 11, 2001, the attacks by Al-Qaeda on New York City and Washington. Although on a much smaller scale, the attack on Monday of this week on Warrant Officer Patrice Vincent in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu and the attack on Wednesday on Corporal Cirillo and Canada's Parliament echoed 9/11. "This changes everything," somehow captured the essence of how those who were targeted in the attacks felt. The statement spoke of a change in awareness of how vulnerable the most constitutionally powerful people in our country were; how poorly defended they were; how unimaginable what had happened was for people; how easy it was for a single individual to take matters into his own hands and, had things ended differently, do the damage of a military coup.

It may be that security has been relaxed around the Centre Block in recent years: many people commented on how much they appreciated how accessible Parliament has been for ordinary citizens. "This changes everything" signals that we expect changes in security measures and increased limitations on access to public buildings. In his statement to Canadians, the Prime Minister said,

...let there be no misunderstanding: we will not be intimidated. Canada will never be intimidated.

In fact, this [week's attacks] will lead us to strengthen our resolve and redouble our efforts and those of our national security agencies to take all necessary steps to identify and counter threats and keep Canada safe here at home, just as it will lead us to strengthen our resolve and redouble our efforts to work with our allies around the world and fight against the terrorist organizations who brutalize those in other countries with the hope of bringing their savagery to our shores. They will have no safe haven.

For those profoundly shaken by the two attacks, the Prime Minister's statement offered reassurance. Canada will prevail in the battle against evil. But in light of what had just happened and what could have happened with multiple attackers and more sophisticated weapons, it was easy to hear the Prime Minister's statement more as rhetorical than factual.

I was already working with the readings for Reformation Sunday by the time all of this happened. And in a rather particular way, the attacks of Monday and Wednesday and the Prime Minister's statement shed light for me on Jesus' teaching in today's Gospel, "...everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." According to Saint Paul in today's reading from Romans, that's all of us. "...All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." Paul writes. What is interesting in both readings is how both Paul and Jesus agree that sin does not have the last word. For the Jesus' followers, he proclaims the unbounded love of God, revealed in his birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection as the antidote for sin. "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples," he teaches those who believed in him, "and you will know the truth, and

the truth will make you free.” And so the challenge for those who would truly be Jesus’ disciples is to continue in his word; to live the risen life he taught and embodied; to allow our faith in God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ to find expression in all that we do and say; to love instead of hate; to consider Jesus’ proclamation of the gospel as the full and final revelation of God, and then use it to reinterpret our life experience. Saint Paul understands the human condition intimately. His own life story was a story of, as he puts it, life under the law which, as he notes, did not lead him to justification. As a zealot, he persecuted the followers of Jesus and, in retrospect, would probably have described his actions as something akin to slavery to sin. The faith of Jesus, however, changed everything for him. Paul was transformed by Jesus’ proclamation from a persecuting zealot to a disciple, and then to an apostle. Although his testimony is often an elaboration of Jesus’ teaching, it reveals the power of the gospel, first in one person’s life, and then in the lives of so many who hear the truth of the gospel. Martin Luther and Phillip Melancthon are in perfect continuity with Saint Paul. They claimed freedom in Christ to reform the medieval church from an institution that oppressed and controlled society to a community of faith grounded in the *good news* of the gospel.

Slavery to sin means giving sin power over us, allowing it to determine our actions; allowing it to govern our response. It calls us to meet violence with violence, terror with terror, and threat with oppression. It ruins our relationships with others and prevents our full humanity, the humanity to which Jesus called us. It starts wars and perpetuates violence and destruction.

Later in the week, Elizabeth May, leader and sole representative in Parliament of the Green Party of Canada made this statement about Wednesday’s attack. She said,

...We must ensure that this appalling act of violence is not used to justify a disproportionate response. We must not resort to hyperbolic rhetoric. We need to determine if these actions are coordinated to any larger group or are the actions of one or two deranged individuals. If it is the latter, we must develop tools and a systematic approach to dissuade our youth from being attracted to violent extremist groups of any kind. We need to protect our rights and liberties in a democracy.

We do know that through history these kinds of events open the door to a loss of democracy. Naomi Klein details the elements of seizing the opportunity created by tragedy or tumult in *Shock Doctrine*. The title of her new and important book on climate, *This Changes Everything*, is correct – the threat of the climate crisis changes everything. The shootings on Parliament Hill do not change everything.

Jesus calls us to draw on a kind of strength that is not our own in the universal battle with sin. In his death and resurrection he shows us an alternative to slavery to sin. Can we truly be his disciples, or has everything changed?