

Standing firm

Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17 – 4:1

I do not comprehend what it takes for a gunman to live-stream footage of his rampage to Facebook, filmed with a head-mounted camera. The footage showed him firing indiscriminately at men, women and children from close range inside the Al-Noor mosque. Forty-nine killed, more wounded, and a nation, and the world, shocked and stunned. Last year at the General Assembly, Imam Sayed Razawi said those who followed Christianity and Islam represented “different shades of the creator”, and Christians, Muslims and Jews in Scotland have been working more closely together in recent years to ensure that whilst there are distinctions in what and how we believe, there is also mutual respect and understanding and support.

I do not comprehend what it takes to be so removed from basic humanity and common decency that the only solution is to massacre people of faith in their places of worship at the time of prayer. Men, women and children. We see a planned attack involving a number of people in two separate sites in a country selected because it was the least likely. It says something unpalatable about our world today.

I do not comprehend reports of a Scottish MP’s office being attacked in Perthshire, and a female member of staff being threatened by two men over political differences stemming back to the independence referendum five years ago. It says something unpalatable about our world today.

I do not comprehend the divisions in Parliament and in the country around Brexit, with those divides continuing to deepen and become more complex. The vicious verbal attacks on MPs on different sides, in person and online. Whatever way you voted, this bitter reality has humiliated our political processes in Parliament, made us a laughing stock around the world. Yet as we look around the world: simmering resentment on the Korean peninsula and sabre-rattling between India and Pakistan; the forgotten mass starvation in Yemen and the running sore that is Israel-Palestine; social unrest in France which can also be found not so very far beneath the

surface in Germany and Italy; popular protests in Russia and the wall-building rhetoric of some in the United States; where in the world is a safe place to go to today? It says something unpalatable about our world today.

Churches are not immune to splits and divisions, and the way we express ourselves in congregations, at meetings and other gatherings will sometimes reflect a less than Christian lifestyle when it comes to acknowledging difference of opinion and belief. It says something unpalatable about our world today.

Living with anxiety and fear, picking up the vibe of resentment and prejudice and wilful ignorance and posturing stance-taking is having damaging effects which will be with us for generations. The pressures that are being put upon humanity, by humanity, ratchet up day after day. It says something unpalatable about our world today.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes to Christians living through a time of deep fear and persecution. All that seemed certain was crumbling; all that had seemed safe was now dangerous; life felt out of control and the constants moved around. The solid rock was being lost amidst sinking sand.

Paul says something tough. "Stand firm in the Lord." Stand firm. Not stand firm in your own way. Not stand firm on your own principles. But, "Stand firm in the Lord."

Stand firm, but not inflexibly so. Stand firm, and be aware that there are others around you. Stand firm, but know that there will be times when you have to move.

What does standing firm in the way of Jesus mean? The prophet Micah tells us that God has shown us what is required: "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" David, in Psalm 27, asks that God might teach Him and lead him on a level path, because of his enemies; he prays that he will be able to wait for God, and be strong, with a courageous heart.

It seems to me that what standing firm means has a lot to do with awareness, flexibility, focus and faith. Standing firm has nothing to do with stubbornness, but it has something to do with

persistence. Standing firm has nothing to do with rigidity, but like a tree bending in a gale, able to stay upright because of deep roots. Standing firm has nothing to do with closing your eyes to circumstances and situations, but open eyed, seeing what is going on and responding as best you can with compassion. Standing firm has nothing to do with unyielding belief but with responsive faith. Standing firm has nothing to do with abandoning principles because of the prevailing times but to adapting faith, life, attitudes to a world that is constantly changing so that why we believe, and what we believe and how we believe speaks both challenge and comfort to the world around us today.

Standing firm has nothing to do with pulling up the drawbridge and manning the battlements. It has everything to do with opening the doors to go out into the world, and opening the doors to welcome in the world.

Standing firm means living with the paradox and contradictions of being sure about what you believe but being open to learn and to receive more.

Lent has just begun, the time of rethinking, re-examining and redefining what we believe and why we believe and how we believe. It's not meant to be comfortable; but it's not meant to be impossible.

What are your principles, and what will you take a stand on? If you are intending to stand firm in the Lord, then the first place you might want to look is what it was that Jesus stood for, and take your lead from Him. Generosity and inclusion; humility and hospitality; regular faithfulness inside and outside places of worship; engaging with those He disagreed with and making friends with them when He could; speaking to those no-one else spoke to and keeping the conversation going; accepting the generosity of others; praying privately and publicly; offering healing moments to those who were hurting; comforting the distressed; forgiving enemies; going the second mile; listening to what God was saying to Him each day, and acting honestly on what He heard; making friends with the unexpected and excluded people. And, and, and...

I wondered, on Friday, how we might respond if a gunman came into this Church, and shot dead children, women and men. After the grief and the anger and the fear, what would we do?

Install metal detectors? Hire an armed guard? Keep the doors locked at all times and only admit those who could prove they were members?

Or would we stand firm in the Lord; take reasonable steps about safety, but open the doors again, and share the grief and anger and fear with our community and country and world, and welcome into our midst people as we have always welcomed them?

Today, thinking primarily of our Muslim sisters and brothers in New Zealand, but also about frightened Muslims in Britain, and frightened Jews in Britain, and frightened everyone in Britain, we send our love and our care and our compassion and our prayers, and we stand firm beside them in solidarity. Welcoming everyone, breaking down the barriers and the suspicion and the fear and the prejudice and the ignorance. We go on believing in a God of compassion and tenderness. We stand firm in the Lord – it is more than being in a secure place; it is being a secure person.

Then, this Lent, we might imitate Jesus in our thoughts, in our words, in our actions. Stand firm in that, and you will stand firm with Jesus.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen