

Thursday 28th July 2016 (Feria)

St Faith, Havant

10.30am – Mass

Jeremiah 18:1-6; St Matthew 13:47-53

This feels like one of those weeks where the news is just overwhelming. There's just too much horror for us to cope with. In the last few days alone we have heard about attacks in Germany, Japan, and Afghanistan, and there is ongoing violence we hear less about in Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Even that list almost certainly isn't complete. And as I was sitting down to start work on this sermon, news came through of the murder of Fr Jacques Hamel while saying Mass in France. As you can imagine, for somebody who like me who is training to be a priest that particular outrage felt very close to home.

One of the problems we face ourselves in respect of these ongoing atrocities is that we feel utterly helpless. We don't know what to do in response. When a place is devastated by a natural disaster we may be horrified, we may feel very small and insignificant, but there is almost always a charitable appeal to which we can donate our money or our goods. It may not feel like much, it almost never feels like enough, but it's something – and we know it all adds up. But what can we do to help when a person deliberately drives a van into a crowd of people? When a

person opens fire in a McDonalds, or blows themselves up in a wine bar? There's no appeal we can give money to. Nowhere to donate clothes and supplies. Because, let's be honest, that wouldn't help. What can we possibly do when a person walks into a church and slits the throat of an 84-year-old priest while he is saying Mass?

We can place it in God's hands.

That might sound a bit trite. It might sound a bit like I'm passing the buck, like I'm conceding that there's nothing at all I can do so I may as well shrug my shoulders and get on with my own life like nothing has happened. But that's not what I mean at all. I mean *actively* place it in God's hands.

So first of all, pray. Pray for the soul of Fr Hamel, and for the souls of all who have been killed. Pray for the healing of those who have been injured, and for the peace of those who have been traumatised. Pray for the perpetrators of these atrocities, for those who encourage them, for those who admire them and seek to imitate them. Pray for them because there is not one person who is beyond God's love. There is not one person who is beyond God's grace. There is not one person whose sins cannot be washed away if they are truly penitent.

And pray for yourself and for each other, for courage in the face of danger, for trust in God's power, and yes, for our own repentance and amendment of life lest this day prove to be our last on this earth. Pray without ceasing.

Secondly, be strong in the Lord. Be ready to withstand in the evil day. Not with retaliation, not meeting violence with violence, because that is not the Christian way. The Christian way is to actively turn the other cheek, to do the thing that shows those who wish us harm that we will not be defeated by wrongdoing. And you may not realise it, but all of you have in one way already done it. Because when a priest is murdered even as he goes unto the altar of the Lord, we turn the other cheek by coming to Mass. As we come unto the altar of the Lord, we send the strongest possible signal that Fr Hamel's murder does not defeat us. In fact, I encourage you – if in the next few days you find yourself in a conversation where somebody rightly bemoans this latest killing but expresses the opinion that they can do nothing, please suggest to them that they can do something, and that their local church will be pleased to see them at Mass, the Eucharist, Holy Communion – it doesn't matter what label they give the service. Help that person to actively turn the other cheek, and to be strong in the Lord by doing so. And continue to do so yourselves.

And thirdly, trust in God our merciful but all-powerful judge. Place all these horrors into his hands, because Christ himself tells us what the kingdom of heaven is like: "the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire". Be confident that in God's own time, and in his own mysterious way, evil will be dealt with. That is why we do not need to retaliate, why we can turn the other cheek – because we know that matters of eternal justice, of mercy, of redemption, and – yes – of punishment belong to God.

We are not helpless in the face of so much atrocity. We are not powerless against such horror. Pray. Be strong. Trust. As we do these things, we place this whole world and ourselves into God's hands. God is stronger and greater than horror, stronger than terror, than darkness, stronger and greater even than death. His promise is sure, and nowhere more proved than in the death and resurrection of Christ – that death and resurrection which we will remember and share again at this very altar, just as Fr Hamel was doing on Tuesday in the church of St Etienne-du-Rouvray. Pray. Be strong. Trust. We are not helpless, and evil will not triumph.