

On Justice and Vengeance

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from Lynn Green, YWAM field director, Europe, Middle East and North Africa

On this occasion, the television pundits are right. At about 1 p.m. GMT, September 11th, 2001, the world changed. The future of our world was altered by a series of violent events that are without precedent. The acts of terror in New York, Washington D.C. and Pennsylvania thrust the worst kind of personal tragedy into untold thousands of families, and marked a dramatic change in international relations, economic outlook, religious dynamics, travel routines and many other dimensions of our lives.

Many of us watched the events unfold on our T. V. screens, while others followed the horror on radio. Rarely, if ever, has news traveled to so many people so quickly.

As I watched, I understood what was happening but could not comprehend the consequences. Those images, which seemed to be from the script of a B-quality horror film, marked the beginning of days or perhaps weeks of struggle to come to grips with their rational, emotional and spiritual impact. History might even judge September 11th, 2001 to be the most pivotal day in modern times.

So, what am I thinking now --and what should I be thinking, as a Christian? My first response is one that I think I share with the vast majority of humanity. I am feeling an almost indescribable mix of sorrow, revulsion, compassion, anger, frustration and a desire for vengeance as I grapple with the central question: "How could any human being commit such atrocities?"

But the answer comes quickly. These events thoroughly illustrate that the Biblical description of humanity as fallen and 'desperately wicked' is not overstated. There seems to be no bottom to the depths of human potential for evil.

There is also a God-created part of us that longs for justice when we are confronted with such unspeakable wickedness. Undoubtedly vengeful thoughts have occupied the minds of most of us. I believe that comes from an essential, positive characteristic that our creator formed in the human race. We know that injustice is wrong and cannot be tolerated. When this deep, intrinsic drive for justice is moderated by wisdom and self-control, it is a most important influence for goodness and stability in society.

There is a great danger which accompanies this power for good - it can easily overflow into a blinding urge for vengeance. Blind vengeance strikes out like a blunt instrument of death in the hands of a madman. It seeks satisfaction by punishing anyone and everyone who might be in some way connected with the guilty parties. Unmoderated vengeance creates what military

spokesmen sometimes call 'collateral damage'. That is a convenient euphemism for injuries and fatalities among innocent people, and that stokes the fires of further cycles of conflict.

To be more specific, it would be very easy at this time to blame 'Arabs' or 'Muslims' for the acts of terror. Some recent TV. footage would suggest that some communities of Arab Muslims are rejoicing at the deaths in America. Set against that are statements from many other Muslims that express shock and sympathy. Which picture will we believe? There is some truth in both. The great majority of Muslims whom I have come to know in recent years are decent God-fearing people who will deeply identify with our grief in these days. A small minority have been so polarised by perceived injustice that they will rejoice at some sense of retribution. If we give in to that same impulse, there will be no end to the escalation of violence in our future.

The guilty must be identified and brought to justice, but we must take great care that we do not further damage those people who are the near neighbours of the guilty. The task of singling out the guilty who will undoubtedly hide among the innocent will be a daunting and time-consuming task, but we must urge our leaders to give themselves to it with determination and patience.

Finally, we would be unforgivably glib to assume that we are 'the righteous' and all who disagree with us are 'the unrighteous'. We must not make the mistake of assuming that we and our nations have been guiltless and that there are absolutely no grounds for some people to feel that we act unfairly towards them. There could never be justification for the acts of terror we have witnessed in recent days, but this is such an important time for us to listen. There are those who feel deeply aggrieved by some of our (Western nations) policies. There's is not an easy perspective for us to hear or understand, but their feelings and thoughts cannot be dismissed without a hearing. And they will not be silenced by force.

Do we have the wisdom to walk this narrow path? Can we exercise the wise and precise use of the great power that is at our disposal? Can we at the same time humbly listen to and learn from our critics? Such wisdom must surely be a cornerstone of greatness.

Lynn Green