

We remember today the events of September 11th 2001. You may have seen some of the documentaries on television this last week looking at the day that “changed the world.” I’d like us to reflect on that for a few minutes today.

First of all we set this in our context. 9/11 may only have taken place five years ago, but the foundations of this church had only just been dug. We were still meeting, a few of us, in St Mary’s School. Our church had begun services there back in June 2000.

Then, over in America – that fateful day. And all that followed it: Madrid, Bali, London. Men held now on suspicion of planning more terrorist acts in the sky. A wood near High Wycombe being searched reminds us the danger is close by. Remember one of the London bombers lived less than a mile from here.

So let’s look at the world 9/11 has created.

Five years after 9/11 and President Bush’s declaration of war on terror the threat to airline passengers and other innocent civilians seems as great as ever. British intelligence may have frustrated one group from further acts over the Atlantic, but how long will it be before someone succeeds?

John Reid is right to warn us of the dangers we face but politicians should take heed that many people in Britain and the US feel they are not doing enough to address the underlying causes of terrorism. Let’s face it men living in Aylesbury or Beeston didn’t just wake up one morning and decide to blow themselves into oblivion alongside the innocent in tube and bus; they were driven for a reason.

In a speech in California in July Tony Blair spoke as if there is one great terrorist threat that spans the globe. Experts debate as to how far Al-Qaeda is an integrated organisation and how far it is more like a movement, but there is a growing consensus that

terrorism feeds on a variety of causes and that while bombers are inspired by a common hatred of the West, they are motivated by a range of grievances.

In the Middle East, disgust with corrupt governments drives people into the arms of organisations like Hezbollah and Hamas. Growing numbers of young people there have little prospect of employment.

Across Europe a second generation of immigrants is searching for a sense of identity in the face of discrimination and racial intolerance. For someone like Richard Read it was the experience of prejudice and family breakdown that led him to take up Islam as a religion of protest – a path followed by many Black Muslims in America. Attending radical mosques and hearing about the suffering of brothers around the world fed his sense of injustice and encouraged him to turn to violence.

According to the magazine *Foreign Policy*, 18,944 have died in acts of terror around the world since September 12th 2001. Only eight of those was on US soil. Add the 52 people who died in London on 7/7 and it becomes apparent that while the terrorist threat to Britain and the US is still real, it is a bigger danger elsewhere: 60 died in Britain and the US and 18,884 elsewhere.

General John Abizaid, commander of US forces in Iraq says the struggle to defeat terrorism is 10% military and 90% non-military. That's an interesting observation and hints that if it is to be defeated it will not be through military force. But what will that be.

Critics of George Bush and Tony Blair often focus on the mistakes they have made in Iraq. There is a danger that Iraq will serve as a training ground for a new generation of terrorists who will end up as suicide bombers on European streets. Time will tell. But the truth is that the majority of terrorists involved in

9/11 and 7/7 came from two countries: Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

40% of the population of Saudi Arabia is under the age of 15. Unemployment runs at 30% for men and 90% for women. The house of Saud has kept a tight grip on power by supporting an extremist version of Islam. While the royal family there enjoys the fruits of the country's mineral wealth, young people are taught a poisonous religious message directed against the West and Israel. The result is a cocktail of religious hatred fuelled by perceived injustice and greed of the West.

The US regards Pakistan as a major non-NATO ally, but it could also be regarded as a rogue state. The government in Karachi was almost certainly aware of Abdul Qadeer Khan's activities in selling nuclear secrets and it continues to protect him from foreign investigators. President Musharraf says he hopes Bin Laden will be captured "outside Pakistan by some other people". The truth is that Bin Laden is being sheltered by allies in Pakistan right now.

The government has promised more control over madrassas that are a breeding ground for jihadists but there are plenty more places where you can hear religious hatred and extremism being propagated.

A large proportion of Pakistanis who came to live in Britain come originally from Kashmir and there are close links between Al-Qaeda and Kashmiri terrorist groups.

In the long run one of the most effective measures to reduce terrorism would be to stimulate economic growth and democratic reform in Pakistan and encourage Delhi and Karachi to resolve their argument over Kashmir.

But what saddens me is the fact that religion has so often been seen as part of the problem. My Muslim friends sometimes seem

shocked when I say that as I grow older I become less religious; but it is so obvious that all the faiths of humankind, and their scriptures, have been hugely misused in the service of evil. Remember that the enemies of Jesus were not the military, not politicians but religious leaders. Religious people.

Five years on from 9/11 the world in 2006 is dominated by intractable quarrels bequeathed to us from the 20th century. In all of them religious rhetoric plays a central part. And nearly all of the concern the divided children of Abraham: Muslim, Christian and Jew. Only recently have we seen the resolution of the problems in Ireland where divisions between Catholics and Protestants caused years of bloodshed and misery and now in name of God we face even more dangerous times.

A bit of me wishes John Lennon's words in the song *Imagine* were true: "Imagine ... no religion too". Wouldn't that be good? For religion seems to have been implicated as so destructive around the world and through the generations. And then I realise that not only is that not going to happen but actually, flipping the coin over, it may be religion, true religion, undistorted faith, that far from being the cause of so much hatred and killing, may hold the solution.

I said earlier, as I grow older the less religious I have become. What do I mean by that? Well in my earlier days I was very sure in what I believed. I was very clear that I possessed the "truth" and that everyone who had different beliefs than me were destined for hell. But, looking back, I realise that I was fortunate to be white, working class and in employment. Life was good. I can well see that if my circumstances were different, my beliefs, very black and white in those days would have shaped my attitudes and actions rather differently than they were.

Over the years I have learnt that my view on the world is no more 'right' than anyone else's as long as those beliefs don't harm others, in which case they are in the wrong. For all faiths

speaking of the golden rule: “treat others as you would want them to treat you.” Which, by definition, rules out any beliefs that it is OK to kill or maim others in the cause of those beliefs.

Over the years I have learnt that my beliefs are solid and true to the teachings of Jesus so I can let go of religion. Do you see the distinction? Rather than adopt a religious institution and all that goes with it, I am a follower of Jesus. That’s enough for me.

So what might reduce the problem of terrorism in this country, the place where we can have some influence? Two things:

1. Keep things in perspective. Let’s recognise that religion might be hijacked (excuse the pun) by people with agendas of hatred, but let’s remember that the majority of Muslims are just like you and me: God-fearing peace-loving people who want to live their lives just like you and me, albeit through the path of Islam. Let’s keep things in perspective. The few who are intent on the path of war are hugely outnumbered by those who are peace-loving. We need to remember that because the news only talks of the few, not the many. We need to remind ourselves of that, otherwise our world view will become very depressing and leave us with a sense of helplessness.

True religion is not the cause, but it may be the cure. We need to promote interfaith relationships. That’s why I visited the mosque a couple of months ago and spoke to the men there about the need for understanding and that understanding will only come through better relationships. So we need to discourage the factions in society that have developed over recent times. We need to promote citizenship, a sense of community, of patriotism. Let’s encourage all who live here to be proud to be British citizens. No more ghettos of factions that do not integrate with the majority.

Only where relationships are established and then friendships forged will there be a lasting chance that the people that live on these islands will live at peace with one another.

I rejoice that I am good friends with Abdul, Imam at the mosque. Our friendship has enabled us to learn from one another. And that I pass on to you today.

2. But secondly, mosques have a responsibility to root out extremism in their midst. There will always be some who will be drawn to violence, to hatred, to war. And those who promote this should be banned from mosques immediately. And the law in this land should be more rigorously applied. We still hear of radical clerics peddling hatred for everything Western. The law should silence them and, if appropriate, deport them from our shores.

And there's one final thing. There a verse in the scriptures that declares: **“With God, all things are possible.”**

I hang on to those words at times like this.

I hang on to those words when my own life is crumbling around me.

I hang on to those words when I read of suicide plots.

I hang on to those words when there's more bad news from Iraq.

I hang onto those words when I visit the sick in hospital.

I hang onto those words when I sit with the bereaved.

Do you see?

As I get older and less religious, my faith is deepened by hanging on to the truth like that seen during the darkest days of the Blitz when it seemed the world was doomed.

In the darkness we realise that with God all things are possible:

including a day when young men and women no longer feel the need to destroy themselves;

a day when the earth's resources are justly shared;

a day when West and East understand and appreciate each other, celebrating diversity;

A day when religion is not twisted;

A day when religion is no longer needed when people see their creator face to face;

A day when God's Kingdom is established on earth. The Bible declares that day will come. Until then, we look and hope.

One of the last words in the Bible declares:

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth ... now God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes ... for the old order of things has passed away.”