

Dear Class Member,

The news of bombings of packed churches and hotels on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka reached us before Easter services in the United States took place. That news reminds us that being a Christian in church on Easter Sunday, Christianity's most important day, does not guarantee God's protection, not even for that hour of worship. These terrorist attacks are among the atrocities that force the question that never goes away for people of faith: Why does God allow such things to happen?

While on one level, that question is unanswerable, exploring it sometimes helps us move deeper in our walk with God. So that will be the topic of our next class.

If you wish to start thinking about our topic in advance, below is some introductory material.



Easter Services in Sri Lanka Shattered by Bombs; Many Casualties

The Wired Word for the Week of April 28, 2019

In the News

More than 300 people in Sri Lanka were killed and some 500 injured on Easter Sunday when three churches, packed with worshipers, and three luxury hotels in the midst of the busy breakfast time, were bombed in near-simultaneous attacks. Later in the day, there were smaller explosions at a housing complex and a guest house, with victims there adding to the death count. Additional bombs and bomb-making material continues to be found.

The church bombings were carried out during Easter services in Negombo, Batticaloa and Colombo. The hotels bombed were all in Colombo. According to reports on Monday morning, all seven attacks were carried out by suicide bombers who are thought to be Sri Lankan nationals.

Sri Lankan authorities said the suicide bombers belonged to National Thowheed Jama'ath, a little-known local militant radical Islamist group with suspected foreign links and assistance. On Tuesday, ISIS claimed responsibility for the attacks, but provided no evidence to prove the claim.

The population of Sri Lanka is about 70.2 percent Buddhist (mainly Sinhalese-speaking), 12.6 percent Hindu, 9.7 percent Muslim (mainly Tamil-speaking), and 7.4 percent Christian. Although religious freedom is guaranteed, Buddhism has special privileges in the Sri Lanka constitution. Christians come from both Tamil- and Sinhalese-speaking groups. The Muslim population is mainly Sufi, with the great majority opposed to the Thowheed Jama'ath movement.

Also on Tuesday, Ruwan Wijewardene, the state minister of defense, said the attacks were in retaliation for the March 15 killing of Muslims in two mosque attacks by a gunman in Christchurch, New Zealand, but Wijewardene did not say where that claim came from. He also said another local group, Jammiyathul Millathu Ibrahim, was involved with the bombings along with National Thowheed Jama'ath.

So far, 40 arrests have been made of individuals believed to be connected to the bombings.

Reports say that more than two weeks ago, a police official warned of a threat to churches, but the authorities failed to act on the information.

The churches attacked included the Catholic Shrine of St. Anthony in Kotahena, Colombo, the Catholic Church of St. Sebastian in Negombo and the Zion Church in Batticaloa, a Protestant congregation.

After the bombing at St. Sebastian, Father Danushka Fernando said, "We cannot explain this. This was supposed to be the Mass of the children, so lots of women and children were present."

Another priest in the courtyard said he was struggling to contain himself. "If this is done by who I suspect -- is this their religion?" he said.

"This is insanity. As leaders we must ask people to love one another," he added, declining to give his name. "But speaking as a person, I am angry."

Given the time difference, the attacks in Sri Lanka were in the news by the time of Easter services in the UK, where the archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, spoke of them in his sermon that morning.

The archbishop said he had spoken to the bishop of Colombo, Dhiloraj Canagasabey, in the aftermath of the attacks to express his condolences and assure him of his prayers.

Welby shared some of his conversation with the bishop: "Bishop Dhiloraj had been in the midst of his Easter Eucharist; he was just beginning the Prayer of Consecration when the police arrived and said, 'You must come with us, they are about to come and kill you.'"

But Dhiloraj refused to move until he had finished the Prayer of Consecration in his packed cathedral. Welby said, "I quote his exact words to me: 'If God gives me permission to live, I shall live. If he gives me permission to die, I shall die.'"

The archbishop concluded his sermon by appealing to Christians to put their hope in the Resurrection to get them through uncertainty and be witnesses of this hope to others.

"In our country we will see our future through forgiveness, reconciliation, hope and overcoming these stories of fear and betrayal," Welby said. "But Christians must show how to live resurrection life; that the rest of the world may see above all in forgiving one another and loving

one another, making visible what is unseen; but witness begins with the individual meeting the risen Christ."

The Easter bombings are the first major terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka since 2009, when that country's civil war ended. The country had been making strides since then, with tourism growing. Many fear these attacks will set back the progress.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Pointing a Finger at a Terrorist Group in the Aftermath of the Sri Lanka Blasts.](#) *The New York Times*

[Sri Lanka Authorities Were Warned Two Weeks Before Attacks, Says Minister.](#) *The Guardian*
['Will to Power' Behind Sri Lanka Church Bombings, Says Archbishop of Canterbury.](#) *Christian Today*

Applying the News Story

Horrific events such as these bombings often leave Christians and other believers in God puzzling about how to reconcile the belief, on one hand, that God is both good and powerful with, on the other hand, the reality of evil. In fact, theologians have a word for that problem: *theodicy*. Specifically, theodicy is the attempt to defend the goodness of God despite the existence of evil. Some of the best thinkers among people of faith have labored long and hard to come up with a satisfactory explanation, and so far, none has succeeded, so we don't expect to do so either.

Besides, there seems to be something distinctly unholy about rattling on in defense of God while hundreds of people have lost their lives and many more than that have had their lives devastated and are dealing with personal shock and grief.

So this is more a time for committing ourselves to help out in any way we can. Ask about the suggestions in the "Responding to the News" section in the teacher's version of this lesson.

Having said that, for us to continue our lives of faith in God, we need somewhere to land with our ponderings about how God can let such tragedies occur. Finding that place is part of what we hope to accomplish with this lesson.

The Big Questions

Here are some of the questions we will discuss in class:

1. Why doesn't God always protect the faithful from harm? Or does he, and it is our understanding of "harm" that is lacking?
2. What does it mean that our lives are in God's hands?
3. What word of hope might you speak to someone who has survived the bombing but lost loved ones in the attacks? What might make this difficult for you? What might help you do so?

4. How was your Easter celebration affected, if at all, by the knowledge of what happened to Christian worshippers in Sri Lanka?

5. What is your response to Archbishop Welby's comments in the "In the News" section above, in the paragraph beginning "In our country we will see ..."?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

We will look at selected verses from these Scripture texts. You may wish to read these in advance for background:

[Jeremiah 32:17; 1 John 4:8](#)

[1 Thessalonians 5:21-22; Luke 13:1-5](#)

[Isaiah 63:7-16](#)

[Hebrews 12:3](#)

[Psalm 46:1-11](#)

[Isaiah 55:8-9](#)

In class, we will talk about these passages and look for some insight into the big questions, as well as talk about other questions you may have about this topic. Please join us.