



Terrorist attacks and sin that goes on

It is strange that the attack on Westminster yesterday happened in the same week as the death of Martin McGuinness.

In McGuinness you can see something both of the good of Christianity and of the evil. The evil comes from the conviction that, when you are planning a campaign of murder, you are doing the right thing. Whatever Jesus' teachings, Christians across history have been notoriously keen to use the sword in circumstances history does not feel to have really been necessary.

The sectarianism between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland in the 1970s is a good example of religion, and specifically Christianity, at its worst. Streets became war zones; communities were riven with hatred.

And yet one cannot deny that McGuinness' rehabilitation, his eventual friendship with Ian Paisley, and his ability to lead people away from violence, was at least partly driven by Christianity too: in it he embodied the ability to be forgiving and to forgive, the ability to find a fresh start, the chance for redemption.

In part due to his leadership, the bombings that periodically used to convulse London during my childhood dried up and have come to an end. They are relegated to history.

What's extraordinary is that as one head of the hydra dies, another has reared up.

Once again, there are religious people, convinced of their own righteousness, ready to kill others in order to achieve a wider aim.

The so-called Islamic State will die in the end, as will radical Islamist violence, though it may take decades to do so.

But it leaves me thinking that, even if it does, there may well just be another evil in its place. I am not sure that London will ever be free of would-be bombers. Just taking Parliament, in the long view, the Gunpowder plot of 1605 came very close to achieving more than Khalid Masood could ever have dreamed of.

At the heart of the Christian message lies a dual insight about humanity. First, that humans are capable of more good than people ever really imagine; that God's spirit lies inside each one of us. Second, conversely, that the human capacity for sin is formidable.

In our tradition, one name for it is the devil; for some, it's more helpful to see it as just evil. Whatever you call it, it is very, very real. The evidence is all around.

As the LORD said to Cain in Genesis, "Sin lurks at the door, but you must master it." Arguably, in the end, McGuinness did. Humans often don't.

