

TOO FAR GONE?

Is any human being ever too far gone?

Are there some people in the world who are beyond saving? Who are beyond redemption?

Are there individuals whose lives are so destroyed, so trashed, that even God's amazing grace is out of reach for them?

Apparently, not to Christ. There would seem to be love enough and room enough in Jesus' heart for even murderers and those who are actively working to thwart God's salvation plan. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing."

There's a deep desire in those words; a sad longing for the wayward people of Jerusalem who have committed so much wrong to repent, change their ways, and open their eyes to the truth about the saving Jesus is doing. ". . . how often I have longed to gather your children together . . . and you were not willing."

Those words of Jesus are very pertinent, very relevant, during the season of Lent. This forty-day period we're in is when Christ's call for us to return to him and gather under the shelter of his wings is particularly loud and clear. Our Lord wants us back. Our Lord yearns for a homecoming. But has too much water gone under the bridge for us? Have we passed the point of no return? Have we made so many mistakes and committed so many wrongdoings that we're no longer welcome in Christ's presence? Is there ever a point when we are too far gone to return to the Lord?

I think those questions are particularly relevant to us in light of the horrific events that shocked the world in the past couple of days, in Christ Church, New Zealand. A White Supremacist and xenophobic terrorist named Brenton Tarrant went on a shooting spree, and killing some fifty people and wounding about fifty more. His victims were innocent individuals, people of God like us, who were gathered in mosques to worship and pray and give praise to the Lord. They were targeted because they were immigrants who had moved to New Zealand, one of the safest nations on earth, to have a better life. They had done nothing wrong.

The vast majority of New Zealanders welcomed their Muslim brothers and sisters with open arms. They were pleased to receive those new citizens into their country, and accepted them warmly. But not Brenton Tarrant. Tarrant's prejudice, hatred and resentment had absolute control over him. For years he had been planning this evil and horrific murder. It was a textbook example of premeditated murder.

And even after he was arrested, he expressed absolutely no regret or remorse. He was not the least bit sorry that he took the lives of so many innocent individuals; that he seriously wounded many others; that he caused unimaginable grief and suffering to the loved ones of those victims; and that the survivors would have to live with the terror and anguish of his ghastly act and relive it in their minds for the rest of their lives.

To borrow and adapt an old saying, "Look up the word 'evil' in the dictionary, and you will see a picture of Brenton Tarrant."

And yesterday I asked myself, "Is Brenton Tarrant too far gone?" Is he beyond saving? Beyond redemption? Is his life so evil, so malevolent, so sinful, that even God's amazing grace is out of reach for him? Would Jesus' words of lamentation and tears of heartache for the city of Jerusalem be appropriate and relevant to a man like Brenton Tarrant, whose horrific crime shocked the entire world?

"Brenton Tarrant, you who killed innocents and murdered those who came to New Zealand seeking a better life, how I long to gather you to myself, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing."

Brenton Tarrant, who committed such an unimaginable atrocity and caused so much devastation and misery, shakes our faith to the very core. He challenges all that we are and everything we believe as Christians. Because when Jesus says, "Forgive those who persecute you," he is talking about forgiving someone like Tarrant. When Jesus tells us, "Pray for your enemies," he is telling us to pray for people like Brenton Tarrant.

That's an almost impossible task for us, isn't it? Because, in all honesty, Tarrant and others like him who are great evildoers and we consider to be less than human, don't deserve our forgiveness and our prayers. I'm certain that Jesus knew this. After all, Jesus was fully human like we are, and the only advantage he had over us as a human being when he walked the earth was his deep and abiding love for and faith in God, his Heavenly Father.

And yet, Jesus the fully human being, as he hung in anguish, dying on the cross, prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." And to a criminal hanging on a cross next to him—a criminal who, by his own admission had committed terrible deeds, perhaps even murder, and deserved

the punishment he was getting—Jesus said, “I assure you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Would he say the same to Brenton Tarrant, if Tarrant repented and expressed genuine remorse for his heinous and immoral act, and asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his Kingdom?” Or would he consider Tarrant too far gone? Sorry, Brenton, what you did was so evil and monstrous that you are beyond saving. You are beyond redemption. God’s grace and mercy are out of your reach. You have separated yourself from the love of God.

That is the more popular view, isn’t it? Most people believe there are certain lines that can’t be crossed—mass murder being one of them—or else God’s mercy and grace are no longer applicable to you.

It’s a safe bet that most of us believe there is such a thing as being too far gone. And yet, the words we heard Jesus speak this morning still echo in our ears. Christ’s lament and his mournful plea for the people of the City of David continue to resonate with us, and they’re more than relevant in response to the horror that happened in Christ Church, New Zealand. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.”

You see, Jerusalem had its share of murderers, who had brazenly killed the people that God had sent them to speak words of guidance and dire warning. And yet, God still longed for them, despite their terrible deeds. God still yearned for the people of Jerusalem to return to him even though their sins were akin to spitting in God’s face. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together”

Who’s to say that God’s heart doesn’t have the same yearning for Brenton Tarrant?

Please know that even as I say those words, my heart is repulsed. My mind is resisting. My soul is sickened. But I also don’t know the heart and mind of God, which means I don’t know what the ultimate, eternal destiny will be for an unrepentant mass murderer.

Is the same Lord who wept over the children of Jerusalem and felt great anguish because they weren’t willing to repent and return to him now weeping over a smug and unrepentant killer? Only God knows.

Is Jesus shedding tears for a murderer of fifty innocent people, just as he is certainly shedding tears for those fifty innocent murdered people; and shedding tears for the fifty who were wounded; and shedding tears for the families and loved ones of those fifty innocent murdered people whose hearts

are broken and whose lives are devastated?

I read something once—I don't remember what book it was in or who wrote it—but the words have always stayed with me. "Unless God's mercy and grace is for everybody, then God's mercy and grace isn't for anybody." And think about this. The worse the sin, the more God's mercy and grace are needed.

If we can wrap our heads around the possibility that God's mercy and grace might apply even to the horrendous sin of Brenton Tarrant—which is one of the worst sins ever committed—if God's mercy and grace can apply even to that horrific and cowardly deed, assuming that Tarrant was repentant and genuinely remorseful, then we can never be so far gone that God can't redeem and save us by that same divine grace and love. Because if God's mercy and grace is for everybody, that means it's for us, too.

And it also means the words of the Apostle Paul that we recited in this morning's Call to Worship are true and can be trusted: "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Thanks be to God. Amen.