

Commemoration of those who were killed in the Orlando Massacre

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Today is a day of mourning. While death always brings sorrow into our midst, the senseless loss of life we saw in Orlando last Sunday grieves us deeply. It is a loss for the LGBTI community, it is a loss for the American people, it is a loss for us in Australia, it is a loss for all humanity—it is also a loss for God.

Even now within a short space of time we are trying to come to grips with the erratic behaviour of the lone gunman, Omar Matteen. The media is ablaze with trying to identify the motives of this man, despite unanswered questions. Why did he drive from his home for two hours to target the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando? Why did he choose a gay nightclub on this occasion, if he had previously frequented it? Why, before his attack, did he ring 911 giving his name and location indicating he was a follower of the Islamic State terrorist group?

We may never know the answers to these questions—yet the pain of his actions, the unjustifiable attack upon his fellow citizens, and his apparent hatred of those in the gay community fuelled his desire to kill—randomly and mercilessly—reeking havoc by the slaughter of innocents and turning the Pulse Nightclub into a theatre of war.

Forty-nine dead, 53 hospitalised, is the current toll for the city of Orlando, plus countless traumatised through hostage or escape. Described as the worst mass killing in modern American history it is a cause for outrage as well as grief. Outrage that someone should have access to an assault rifle so as to inflict such damage. Outrage that any one would target law abiding members of the community, because they identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or intersex. Grief that so many were slaughtered by a crime of hate.

Our world has changed in the past two decades, before our very eyes. It is twenty years since the Port Arthur massacre, which shocked our nation with the death of 35 people and 23 injured. We were

blessed with political leaders whose bipartisan support implemented gun controls in our country. If I read President Obama's words aright, he would very much value a similar bipartisan approach to gun control in the United States.

It is only seven months ago that we gathered in this Cathedral to mourn with members of the French community following the attacks on Paris where 130 people were slain. Twelve months before that we mourned the deaths of those killed in the Martin Place siege. 'When will this end?' we cry!

As Australians, we abhor violence in all its forms—domestic violence, street violence, xenophobic violence, religiously motivated violence, and especially violence against members of the LGBTI community. As the leader of the Anglican Church in Sydney I want to affirm my stance against all such outbreaks of violence, and if any members of our churches have participated in such acts of violence against women, against young people, against ethnic minorities, against religious minorities or against those from the LGBTI community I offer my heartfelt apology. Yet we must all search our hearts, as evil resides in each one of us. We have all fallen short of the glory of God. None of us are without fault. Words of derision, mockery and exclusion so frequently fall from our lips when directed against persons who are different from us. This is especially the case for members of the LGBTI community, who have suffered the verbal abuse that so deeply cuts into a person's soul. Where we have been guilty of such words, I also offer my apology on behalf of the Anglican Church in Sydney.

If it surprises some sections of the community that St Andrew's Cathedral is hosting a service of prayer to commemorate the death of members of the LGBTI community in far off Florida, it is because we want to show our solidarity with our American friends, and I am so glad the Consul General has been able to adjust his diary to be here tonight (as we are also grateful for the presence of the Governor, Prime Minister and Premier and many others whose diaries have all been adjusted to be with us today); we also want to express our condolences to those of the gay community in Sydney; and we want to encourage the peace loving Muslims of Sydney, representatives of whom have joined us tonight, who likewise abhor the terrorism of Islamic extremists.

All people are made in the image of God; that is why they are special, each and every one of us, regardless of our ethnic origin, our religious beliefs, our sexual identity or even political persuasion.

God's love knows no bounds. He extends his love to all without distinction and without prejudice. Therefore when one, let alone 49, bearers of the image of God are murdered, God grieves. When a further 53 are injured and hospitalised, God grieves. For our God is a God of compassion and grace, and in the depth of our sorrow and pain, he offers to carry us 'through the valley of the shadow of death.'

The words of Psalm 23, just sung by the choir, remind us of the constancy of God's love. One thousand years before Christ, King David knew what it meant to serve the living God. He calls the Lord his shepherd, for he knows the way of the shepherd and the care he extends to his sheep. The shepherd provides rich pasture for his little ones and restores their soul. Yet life for King David was not always secure, he walked through the valley of the shadow of death. He knew persecution and the wrath of his enemies as he fled for his life for nearly thirty years, and yet through those years he also knew that the Lord his shepherd was by his side, to comfort and to guide him. Yet he also knew of the promise of God that at the end of his life David would dwell in his house forever in his presence.

David's greater son, Jesus of Nazareth, experienced the same journey as King David, for he too knew the pain and agony of walking through the valley of the shadow of death. He trusted in his heavenly Father, who vindicated him by raising him from the dead. Jesus lived the life we could not live and died the death that we deserved. By his life, death and resurrection, Jesus has tasted death for everyone and offers the hope that is beyond the grave. Jesus has become the good Shepherd and invites us to follow him as the sheep of his pasture.

At the moment we are all walking through that valley of the shadow of death. Yet God's promise to be our shepherd remains constant. As he was David's shepherd, as he was Jesus' shepherd, so he can be our shepherd, who leads us beside still waters and dark valleys, who restores our soul, and offers us life eternal.