

# Comment

*Do not go out into the countryside, do not venture  
on the roads, for the enemy's sword is there, there  
is terror on every side.* (Jer. 6:25)

Jeremiah's warning to the people of Jerusalem may provide some comfort to those public servants faced with the task of reassuring an anxious society about the recent vast increase in crime figures and the failure of the police and the courts to deal with it. Paradoxically, the stock political response to such developments is a call for longer prison sentences, severe custodial regimes and greater limitations on individual rights and freedoms before the law. In the absence of any serious attempt to re-texture the fabric of society many people fall back on the tried and tested methods of terrorising the delinquent into conformity; although experience proves this does not work.

Fear, the infliction of terror, is part of the common political and diplomatic vocabulary these days. The threat of terror touches all of us from Kurdistan to Kilburn, even though we try to think about something else as we pass through the metal detectors at airports. Terror is insidious because it breaks down the bonds of human solidarity; it isolates people from one another and threatens precious human values. Terror is at its most dangerous when it deprives us of hope; fear and hope are two sides of the same coin. When we practice the virtue of hope we aspire towards a purpose that is difficult but possible to achieve. When we allow fear to overwhelm us, we lose confidence in the future and come to believe that it holds nothing for us, that there is nothing worth striving for except survival, from that develop anger, aggression and that unbridled competitiveness which stems from fatalism. It is then that we need courage; courage delivers us from the prison of terror; but it costs.

In the Christian tradition courage is principally shown not in fighting off attacks, but in the discreet and unspectacular heroism of endurance. By refusing to be dominated by fear of hurt, loss of status, of property and the last great terror of all, death, we come to know what it is truly to live. But we only lose our fear of death if we know where our life is to end: in that permanent, intimate and glorious union with God for which he created us. Courage does not cast out fear, it refuses to be imprisoned and dominated by it. In a world where terrors abound courage is that much more necessary.

The terrorist, like the military strategist, is rarely directly confronted by the consequences of his action. The randomly placed bomb in a railway station, the blithely hidden incendiary device in a department store, may wreck countless innocent lives but the terrorist is shielded from all this through the projection of collective guilt and corporate responsibility onto his victims. These unfortunates lose their innocence simply in virtue of

being members of what is seen as an 'oppressive' society. They become legitimate, though anonymous, targets, part of that trade in scapegoat diplomacy which has once more come into vogue.

The word 'scapegoat' was coined in the sixteenth century by William Tyndale, the Protestant reformer who translated the Bible into English. Tyndale used the word to describe the tradition of the people of Israel by which two goats were selected on the Day of Atonement. One was chosen by lot to be sent alive into the wilderness with the sins of the people symbolically laid upon it whilst the other was sacrificed. We use the term to describe somebody who takes the blame or is punished for the sins of others. Most often the scapegoats we choose are the symbols of our corporate denial. They free us from the inconvenience of having to accept responsibility for our actions. We are absolved from examining our own complicity in a disordered system by the successful transference of guilt. Having dispatched the scapegoat into the wilderness we can take up our lives once more, better informed if no wiser.

After the allowal of the most recent appeal by the 'Birmingham six' large numbers of M.P.s were moved to sign an early day motion calling for the resignation of the Lord Chief Justice. One of his mistakes was to have held firm to the belief that policemen told the truth in court and did not fabricate evidence, that physical abuse amounting to torture was absent from our prisons and police-stations, that prosecuting lawyers dealt fairly with their brother-advocates for the defence, and that judges were impartial and juries reliable. In short the integrity of the British legal system was proof against scapegoating. Unfortunately, the opposite appears to have been the case. However, the proposed remedy, the scapegoating of Lord Lane as an eerie parody of the victimisation of the 'Birmingham six', would serve only to compound the wrong, leave the injustice unhealed and the system intact. Political and diplomatic scapegoating has the virtue of allowing things to continue in a time-honoured and satisfactory way.

It is the current opinion that the large number of Iraqi soldiers who perished under allied bombardment in southern Iraq were largely ill-trained conscripts. The élite Republican Guard were held in reserve and have since been used to destroy the Shiite and Kurdish uprisings. There is no more vivid parable of the fate of the scapegoat than the present plight of the Kurds driven into the mountains to die by their thousands as punishment for Saddam's failure in Kuwait and as the price of Western *realpolitik*. Mr. Major may not, as he said on April 4, recall asking the Kurds 'to mount this particular insurrection', but there remains the grave suspicion that they were given every possible encouragement short of actual help to topple Saddam. No amount of blankets, food and medical supplies and western largesse will eradicate the belief that international standards have fallen to the extent that genocide and state terrorism are seen as regrettable but necessary allies in maintaining the peace. Scapegoats are definitely back in fashion.

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