

# Deepening Our Faith Through Tragedy

*Rise & Shine, April 28<sup>th</sup>*

## **Isaiah 63:9 (CEB)**

*During all their distress, God also was distressed, so a messenger who served him saved them. In love and mercy God redeemed them, lifting and carrying them throughout earlier times. (For context, read 63:7-16.)*

## **Hebrews 12:3**

*Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.*

---

*In the News*

## **Easter Services in Sri Lanka Shattered by Bombs; Many Casualties**

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.

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.

---

Here are some Bible verses and a question outline to guide our discussion:

**Jeremiah 32:17**

*Ah Lord GOD! It is you who made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you. (For context, read 32:16-20.)*

**Luke 13:1-2**

*At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" (For context, read 13:1-5.)*

**Psalm 46:1-3**

*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. (For context, read 46:1-11.)*

## Questions:

- How was your Easter celebration affected, if at all, by the knowledge of what happened to Christian worshipers in Sri Lanka?
- How do we reconcile the fact that God is good and all powerful, but evil still exists? Is God all powerful?
- Why doesn't God always protect the faithful from harm? Or is it our understanding of "harm" that is lacking?
- What does it mean to you that our lives are in God's hands?

## **Prayer for People in Trouble or Bereavement** (*BCP p.831*)

O merciful Father, who has taught us in your holy Word that you do not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men:  
Look with pity upon the sorrows of your servants for whom our prayers are offered. Remember *them*, O Lord, in mercy, nourish *their* souls with patience, comfort *them* with a sense of your goodness, lift up your countenance upon *them*, and give *them* peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*