

'For Whom the Bell Tolls'

Donald Trump's election mantra, 'America First', reflected a certain weariness and exasperation with international politics and a desire for greater isolation. He wanted, for example, a wall to be built along the border between the United States and Mexico, Muslims from certain countries to be forbidden entry into the USA, and America's involvement with Europe's security and with NATO to be reduced.

He also repeatedly affirmed his opposition to the military involvement of the United States in the Middle East. He did not want to waste his time or taxpayer's money on solving what he saw as the problems of other countries. Even when the Syrian government launched a chemical attack on two rebel-held areas of Damascus in 2013, killing at least 281 people and possibly many more, his view remained (at that time) unchanged. *The New York Times* recorded a number of his tweets: "Syria is NOT our problem". Obama should "stay out of Syria;" "there is no upside and tremendous downside."

On Tuesday 4th April, however, a chemical attack was launched on civilians in the rebel-held Idlib province. At least 72 people were killed, including 20 children. It was a cruel, indiscriminate and disproportionate act of violence. When the news accounts and the chilling pictures showing the brutal effects of the attack on Syrian victims were circulated around the world, Trump was clearly moved:

"Assad choked out the lives of countless men women and children," he said. "It was slow and brutal death. Even beautiful babies were brutally murdered. No child of God should ever suffer such horrors."

It is not my intention here to reflect upon whether or not the military response he made was the right one – of launching 59 Tomahawk missiles fired from US warships to strike the Syrian air base at Shayrat from which the chemical attack was thought to have originated. But what is interesting to note, from a Christian perspective, is the way in which he was led to abandon his isolationist rhetoric. "Am I my brother's keeper?" asked Abel after the murder of his brother (Gen.4:9). 'Yes', is the implicit answer! To quote the poet, John Donne:

"No man is an island,
Entire of itself.
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main...
... Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee."

The suffering of the civilian victims of the chemical attack in Syria quite rightly concerned Donald Trump. Individuals should not, and cannot, live simply for themselves and nor should countries. We are all bound together as people created and loved by God. The sense of solidarity, for good or for ill, runs through the whole of Scripture. As St. John wrote,

"God so loved *the world*" (Jn.3:16, cf Rev.21:24, 22:2).