

Dear Friends,

Political Pragmatism

Alexander Litvinenko was a former officer of the Russian secret service who specialised in tackling organised crime. In 1998 he and several colleagues publicly accused their superiors of ordering the assassination of a Russian tycoon called Boris Berezovsky. Litvinenko was arrested by the Russian authorities, and after his acquittal fled with his family to the UK where he was granted asylum. He continued to work as a journalist, writer and consultant for the British Intelligence and to criticise Putin and his government, until in 2006 he suddenly became ill and died of poisoning by radioactive polonium-210.

Litvinenko's widow, Marina, was determined to track down her husband's killers, and in October 2011 she won the right to have a public enquiry. The enquiry was repeatedly postponed but eventually got under way in January 2015 and a few weeks ago (January 2016) Sir Robert Owen who led the enquiry delivered his verdict: that Litvinenko's murder was carried out by Russian agents, and that the operation was probably approved by President Vladimir Putin himself.

What now is the government to do about it? Had this attack been carried out by Isis or al-Qaida there would doubtless have been retaliatory bombing raids, huge intelligence operations and vociferous commitments to concrete action. But because the culprit is Russia, we are faced with a situation in which a foreign power has murdered one of our citizens within our own borders with apparent impunity. Our Prime Minister David Cameron has of course issued a statement criticising President Putin for presiding over "state sponsored murder" and labelled the killing of Litvinenko as "an appalling crime". But at the end of the day the government is wary of doing anything which might further damage our already fragile relationship with Russia, still recovering from the recent confrontation in the Crimea and Ukraine; it needs Russia's help in tackling the Islamic State in Syria; and it is still over-reliant on Russian oil.

Political pragmatism of this kind reminds me of the attitude adopted by the religious authorities towards the idea of getting rid of Jesus.

"...It is better," said the High Priest Caiaphas, "... that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." (John 11:50)

Caiaphas was worried that Jesus would cause political unrest and unleash a violent confrontation with the Romans. His political pragmatism, then as now, outweighed any concern for due judicial process – the protecting of the innocent and the bringing of the guilty to justice.

But individual lives cannot be written off like so easily. 'Good Friday', the day that Jesus died, is a powerful reminder of how God can bring something positive and good even out of those situations where evil appears to have triumphed. He cares for each and every one of us. The cross shows us the depth of his love, his readiness to forgive, his Presence in the dark times of sorrow and pain as well as those of joy, and the path which can ultimately lead us to the resurrection victory of Easter.

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