

## How should we pray for ISIS? *by J. John*

My son asked me last week, 'How should we pray for ISIS?' A good question and one that needed pondering for a few days! It is hard not to feel very strongly about the rise of ISIS in the Middle East and the brutal and very public barbarities it has carried out. This all raises many questions for the Christian. How should we respond? And what should we pray: 'Lord, destroy them!' or 'Lord, forgive them!'

There is no doubt that some sort of intelligent military action is necessary. This is a merciless organisation whose destruction of Christian and other communities in the Middle East tells us that it cannot be allowed to continue.

Yet there are real dangers for us all here. *The first danger* is that **we adopt an arrogant self-righteousness**. The meteoric rise of ISIS - or whatever it calls itself now - is actually no unexpected wonder. It draws its support from a widespread dislike and contempt for the unjust and corrupt political systems that have long dominated the region. Yet these are regimes that, despite knowing fully what they did, the West was very happy to support as long as they supplied us with oil, bought our goods and didn't oppress our people. So in our praying we must admit at least some responsibility for the present state of affairs.

A *second danger* lies in having a **coldness of heart**. In our praying and our actions we must be concerned for the many in the region, of every religion and of none, whose lives have been turned into tragedies by current events. We need to pray, 'God have mercy!', but as we do so let us also be prepared to be the answer to that prayer.

The *third danger* is quite simply that of **hating those who fight for ISIS**. Let me suggest *three reasons why this is wrong*.

The *first* is that **we believe in a God who judges**. We know that at the end of time the Lord will call all men and women to account before him for what we have done. Knowing that our enemies face such a prospect should transform any temptation to hate them into compassion.

The second reason why hatred should be avoided is that **we who are Christians are under orders not to hate but to bless**. In the Bible we read this: 'Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing' (1 Peter 3:9). There is a profound psychological logic here. Hatred only breeds more hatred in response; in contrast, grace and forgiveness can end it. Let's have the courage to pray that these people might encounter the true and living God and abandon their evil deeds.

The third reason why I believe hatred must be shunned is not primarily theological but actually tactical. Something that the media has largely failed to understand is that the public and deliberately shocking nature of such acts as the beheadings of journalists and aid workers is a deliberate strategy to make us hate the perpetrators. **Their goal is to create a situation in which Islam and the West find themselves in a bitter and bloody war. They want us to hate them, and I suggest that we are wise not to fall into that trap.** Indeed, the greatest of all dangers is that the Christian Church so demonises the forces of radical Islam that our religion of grace and love is extinguished under the weight of wrath. Under such circumstances the Church would cease to be the Church. In a bitterly ironic triumph of evil we would have simply become the mirror image of our enemies.

These are perilous days, but God is great and prayer can achieve what armies cannot. Let us pray and if, as we do, fine phrases fail us, we can always pray those simple wise old words, 'Lord, let your Kingdom come and your will be done.'

**J. John**

Revd Canon