

Gunpowder, treason and plot

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Evening prayer, Sunday 6 November 2005

Yesterday we were much too busy with the Twilight Fair to remember that 5 November 2005 was the 400th anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot—a notable episode of terrorism inspired by religion.

The story is familiar (at least to those over a certain age!). In the early hours of 5 November 1605, officials of King James I of England (he of the ‘King James’ or Authorised Version of the Bible), pursuing an intelligence lead (sound familiar?), found (suicide bomber?) Guy Fawkes and 36 barrels of gunpowder hidden in a storeroom on the ground floor of the Palace of Westminster, where Parliament was to meet later that day. Two years ago, a study by the Centre for Explosion Studies at the University of Aberystwyth concluded that the explosion could have obliterated the Parliament, Westminster Abbey and their surrounds.

Religiously inspired terror is not new in Western history. In England, there was persecution of Protestants under Mary Tudor and of Catholics under her successor, Elizabeth. In 1570, Pope Pius V, by excommunicating Elizabeth and freeing her subjects to depose her, put all English Catholics under suspicion of being traitors. English Protestants worried about an international Catholic empire and tried to stamp out any Catholic spies in their own land.

At some point, burning in effigy of Guy Fawkes replaced burning of the Pope on 5 November and “Guy Fawkes Day” became a respectable family celebration. It was a big deal in my childhood, but is now all but forgotten in Australia due to safety restrictions on the sale of fireworks and the lighting of fires.

One forgets that in many ways late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England was still a Catholic country (especially in provincial and rural areas). The Gunpowder plotters were loyal Englishmen, but trying to rid themselves of a dry Scottish King who they felt had been imposed on them by a Protestant minority. Most English Catholics of 1605 and most modern Muslims living in the West, for example, have in common a loyalty to the country in which they live along with a struggle to maintain their religious and cultural identities in a difficult environment.

Today’s challenges to harmony and love of one’s neighbour differ from the Catholic-versus-Protestant fear of James I’s day (although the conflict still lingers in Northern Ireland). Conflict within Islam and between Muslims and Christians, for example, arises from differing responses to a theological problem — how to allow for diversity yet maintain a vision of the unity of God’s purposes? Muslims derive their theology from Word made book, the Qur’an, the revealed law of God. Christians speak of Word made flesh in the person of Jesus, the revealed relational presence of God. Muslims speak of the singular, ineffable oneness of God, while Christians are more at home with diversity. These are important differences.

Today we quickly learn of events in other lands that are alien to our own culture. But the challenge of diversity comes to us through migration. Communities of immigrants from many countries now live close to one another. Sometimes there are tensions and disagreements and arguments between and amongst members of differing cultures. But most of us remember the exhortation to love our neighbours. For how can we love God, who we have not seen, if we cannot love our neighbour, who we have seen? And all are neighbours now.