

# The Devil's Prophets

EVERY SO OFTEN, a seriously disturbed individual releases his pent up frustration by a murderous assault on innocent people. The “Montreal Massacre” perpetrated by Marc Lépine at the École Polytechnique on 6 December 1989 has scarred the Canadian imagination ever since. A movie version of the event, released in February, was featured last month at the Cannes film festival in France. Similarly, the tragedy at Columbine High School in April 1999 led to Michael Moore’s provocative film *Bowling at Columbine* (2002). The grisliest of all of these horrors, however, must surely remain the murderous rampage that took place in Dunblane, Scotland, on 16 March 1996 in which sixteen young children were killed. No one can ever forget their faces from the school photo that was printed everywhere after the tragedy. It was an event that revealed the face of evil, raw and terrible. Here was hate where there should be love and death where there should be life. These acts force upon our memory other places where innocent people have suffered. In the tragedies of Montreal and Dunblane we find concentrated the grief occasioned by the attack on the twin towers of 9/11 or by the suffering in Darfur. One way to try to make sense of these horrors is to ponder the case of Thomas Hamilton, the perpetrator of the killings in Dunblane. In his brutality, Hamilton is a monstrous parody of a prophet, functioning as a spokesman for evil and destruction where the prophets of God proclaim goodness and life. This at first disconcerting parallel takes us some distance into the mystery of the event, both in what it says and also in God's allowing it to happen.

The vocation of a prophet is to reveal to the people what they have become and, on this basis, to predict what they will be. Satan, too, it seems, has his prophets who reveal in grisly fashion what our society has become and, horrifyingly, what it can be. The insane smile on the face of the assassin is a glimpse of Satan leering, no longer constrained to hide behind a hypocritical allegiance to the common good. In a grotesque version of the prophets of Israel, who sometimes acted out their prophecies (*cf.* Jeremiah 16, 27, 38), Hamilton embodied the evils of our society in his action. For, in the words of Pope John Paul II, we have become a “civilization of death” in which individual and social ills are solved by killing. The logic is obvious: in a situation that seems unbearable, a person with the power to act can resolve his difficulty by killing somebody. The recently murdered American abortionist George Tiller acted upon this principle, as also, it must be said, did his killer. The growing acceptance of euthanasia shows that victims will not be limited to the unborn, the aged, or the comatose. The totalitarian régimes of our century

indicate what to expect when a secular society drops its mask of conventional morality: for “eugenics,” read murder; for “choice,” read murder; for “suicide bombers,” read murder; for “collateral damage,” read murder. Hamilton killed to resolve the psychological conflicts that had troubled him. Commentators recoiled from his action, but they did so without noting the parallel between what he did and what happens thousands of times each day in hospitals and abortion clinics—but with this difference: our doctors and nurses cannot claim temporary insanity. Thus Thomas Hamilton parodies the authentic prophets in another way, in that the people he’s addressing miss the message.

We experience anew in the first moments of each tragedy the inevitable questioning of God's providence, which seems to have failed again, as it did at Auschwitz, in the Gulag, during the Ukrainian famine, in the killing fields of Cambodia, . . . as it did in the death of Jesus. Hamilton insane is, in a way, more difficult to account for than Hamilton sane, for in the former case there is no possibility of invoking man's freedom to choose evil instead of good. While the workings of providence cannot fully be understood, we do see in this tragedy elements found in all such cases. To begin with, the scientific principles that govern the world remain intact, whatever the consequences. If a Mother Teresa falls off a ladder, gravity will bring her crashing down as surely as it would a Hitler. The bullet fired has no discrimination; it kills a child as easily as it kills an assassin. What Dunblane tells us is that the laws of the social sciences also apply, however much we may have occasion regret it. A neglected or abused child will be neurotic, and the delusions of the deranged will have their effect. The evil consequences of an individual or a society in disarray are as inevitable as the laws governing food chemistry or physical motion. But just as God uses the physical world to show his glory he also uses the moral order effectively to accomplish his beneficent intention for mankind. Good can come from evil; the cross of Christ teaches us that. And, as Christians, we must believe that somehow these children, like the other victims of mindless violence, have given their lives for us. How have we been affected?