

Truth always prevails

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By Danielle Vella

On Monday night, unidentified hooligans set fire to and destroyed the car and front door of a lawyer working for the Jesuit Refugee Service, in an attempt to intimidate her and her family. We presume it is because she belongs to an organisation known for defending the rights of immigrants.

The lawyer, Katrine Camilleri, happens to be my sister, so I was none too happy when I heard the news. The first thing that came to mind, after concerns for her family's safety, was the injustice of targeting her, a person wholeheartedly committed to helping anyone - Maltese, foreigner, no matter - in need.

Like the rest of the Maltese people, or at least, the majority of them, I am alarmed at this insidious trend of violence against innocent people, especially since this is not the first such attack. We are all left with a feeling of growing unease, that surely it will happen again sooner or later, and where will the perpetrators stop? And we find ourselves becoming afraid.

Is the object of our fear unknown, nameless, or can we fathom something about the people who have committed this crime? To my mind, there are two elements that stand out: one is apprehension of those who are somehow different from us - they are a threat that must somehow be contained.

"Different" could be a stranger, a foreigner, or it could merely be someone who has opinions contrary to mine, who believes in another god, or who dresses or talks in a "strange" way.

The second element is the means employed by some groups to eradicate this perceived threat, by hook or by crook; the ruthless methods they use to make everyone toe their line. In other words: no freedom to be who you are, and no freedom of thought or expression.

Resorting to intimidation to force others to fall in line is far from new: the chapters of history are bursting with examples. Not so long ago, the Communists did it all the time. Across Europe, gypsies are attacked by so-called "skinheads", because they dare to be different from mainstream society. In some Muslim countries, Catholics are not allowed to hear Mass or to pray, even in their own homes. The list could go on forever.

In Malta too, the recent arson attacks surely remind some of the bad old days - which no one wants to see again - when people who dared to have certain political beliefs were punished for them.

Needless to say, such coercive methods have consistently proven unsuccessful. But this is probably of only scant comfort to people whose property is ruined and whose

personal safety, and that of their families, is threatened. And anyhow, it does not mean fundamentalists who use such means are not dangerous.

So where does all this leave us? First of all, the violent methods of what is presumably a small group of extremists must be completely rejected with a unanimous voice.

It is one thing to debate about the benefits and evils of migration on television, or to write about it in the papers, and quite another to use ugly, criminal means to make your point.

Perhaps most importantly, I think we should not allow ourselves to be afraid. Burma's famous pro-democracy activist, Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest for years, warns that fear could masquerade as "common sense or even wisdom, condemning as foolish, reckless, insignificant or futile the small, daily acts of courage which help to preserve man's self-respect and inherent human dignity".

This Nobel Peace Laureate's description of fearlessness is courage that could be described as "grace under pressure".

In reality, groups of people who seek to strike chords of fear by resorting to violence betray an underlying paranoia. Their compulsion to suppress anyone who disagrees with them betrays their own fear.

Like all repressive dictators and ideologies, they are petrified of allowing people to live in freedom and democracy. Perhaps they are afraid of the truth?

This week, Catholics mark the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. Before condemning him, Pilate asked him what he thought the truth was.

Throughout his life, Christ talked about a kingdom built on universal solidarity, where all were welcome, especially strangers and untouchables.

He paid with his life for his vision of the truth, a victim of the supreme intolerance of fundamentalists of his time. But they did not manage to wipe out his kingdom, and his message remains the same for all: Don't be afraid, the truth sets you free.