

14 August 2011, Trinity 8, Proper 15

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Psalm 67

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

I've been planning this address for some time. Then this last week, things happened that overturned my plans. The riots. I simply cannot ignore them.

I do not see in them anything that has not been seen before in recent history. To give a few examples: In the 18th century civil chaos was such that people ventured out of doors at night at their peril; look at Paris in revolutionary times; student riots and Brixton riots in my living memory. In January 1848 Abraham Lincoln said: "Any people anywhere, being inclined and having the power, have the right to rise up and shake off the existing government, and form a new one that suits them better."

I've no doubt that the riots were fuelled by evil, by boredom, by a lack of respect for other people, by a lack of tough love, by the psychology of the mob, by an education system that promotes rights over responsibilities and is increasingly feminised. But also a sense of powerlessness. And while it's right that the perpetrators are made to face the consequences of their actions. I just wish the same applied to bankers.

But we would do well not to point the finger at others. We—all of us in the west—take more than we need. We all do risky things expecting someone else to mend us when the risks don't pay off. We live in a welfare state that seems to encourage people not to take responsibility for their actions. We envy what other people have, and the evil advertising industry incites us to grab it. We do things to seek approval from other people, and this leads to lying – diplomacy we call it – to obfuscation – pastoral sensitivity we call it, and to the adulation of the masses for so-called celebrities who, in truth, are ordinary human beings quivering in terror behind the masks that are made for them by menacing media moguls. And we are all complicit. We listen to the music. We pay to go to football matches. We buy the publications if only to disapprove of them.

It is not possible to live on this planet without the divine image within being maimed by what we do or don't do. We are surrounded by things that purport to be quickfix solutions, following the latest fashions, the latest brands, the latest chic destination to visit. But the truth is, these things are not satisfying: the effects don't last. They are like candyfloss, insubstantial, sticky and full of air. Because we set them up as idols, and we become obsessed by them, they steal our liberty: we become slaves to them. This is what St Paul called the flesh. There are lots of these wolves in sheep's clothing that sing their siren song. They all lead us up a cul-de-sac. They don't lead to green pastures.

These human failings – wanting more than we need, wanting what others have, and the mob psychology in which we seek the approval of others – are the failings that were identified 1700 years ago by Evagrius the Solitary as the deadliest of the seven sins. And before that, they were the temptations of Christ. I see the results of these sins daily in myself as I want this or that CD, or this or that new book, or eat something that I'm told will clog my arteries but I like the taste. I see the results of these failings every time I drive between these churches and the Rectory. I pass homes behind electric gates and electronic security systems. Every time I am put in mind of Psalm 17 verse 10: *they are inclosed in their own fat and their mouth speaketh proud things*. Like Gollum in Lord of the Rings, we want to hang on to what we think is ours and we become spiritually wizened and deformed in our obsession to do so.

We all hide behind masks, behind personalities. We all mask the divine light within. We put on a pretence. We say that this is necessary for the smooth running of society, for manners, for charm. How I am suspicious of charm. There is a notion that a façade of smoothness and perfection impresses others, that we must do all we can to hide our wounds. We put up barriers between ourselves and other people: barriers of attitudes, possessions, mental attitudes that form security systems between others and ourselves.

This pretence never works! It's too good to be true. You know how infuriating it is to deal with bureaucrats who refuse to acknowledge that they've made a mistake. You know how healing it is when someone acknowledges that they got it wrong. Perhaps you've witnessed the effect of letting someone else see by your tears, your wounds, that you too are vulnerable. Perhaps you've seen how effective this can be in bringing reconciliation, forcing reassessment, resurrection that comes after death of what we thought we held dear. I'm certain that I often get things wrong, and unintentionally as a result people can be hurt.

I look around and see the church complicit in pretence. It erects barriers. I see senior staff hiding behind status (all those titles), behind secretaries and personal assistants and chaplains. I see the institutional church hiding behind rules and regulations. I see PCCs hiding behind 'we've always done it this way' and – as was said to me three years ago with breathtaking arrogance 'we'll soon have you whipped into our way of thinking.' All this is humanly understandable. It is truly pathetic.

In the exchange between Jesus and the woman, today's Gospel tells us that erecting barriers to exclude people who are different from us is never acceptable. Depending on how you read it, it shows Jesus as truly human

acknowledging that his first comments had been inappropriate. Or else that he was tongue in cheek provoking the woman to justify her opinion, which he then affirmed.

We see exclusions in churches about all sorts of things: who can sit where, who can do the flowers, who can bake the scones (wars are fought over this), who can be a server, what people should wear, commenting on whether people stand or sit or kneel to pray. We see it in the way some so-called Christians reject people who disagree with them. We see it in the way that some people accept as valid only certain ways of expressing their faith. *In Christ. Are you saved? Have you accepted Jesus into your life? Let the love of God into your heart. Jesus loves you.* That awful prayer for serenity 'go placidly ...' or whatever (Go placidly and vomit). This is all gobbledegook to me – it is not how I choose to express my perception of the Divine, or of the meaning of Jesus and his work.

Ends and beginnings

From the Church of Ireland Gazette this week:

A great challenge is posed by moving on from a parish or a position or a place of work; that requires great strength of will and purpose. Anyone who has had experience of this will agree that suddenly the place from which one is moving has never seemed so attractive! All its advantages are glaringly obvious, in a way they had never been before. Perhaps that is also because people's attitudes change when they know you are about to disappear from their lives. Suddenly, there is a loosening of emotions, a reaching out and willingness to articulate friendship which may not previously have been on offer. Sad, however, that it takes a move to allow this to happen - perhaps it is symptomatic of the perversity of human nature that we all do not appreciate people until it is too late.

That is absolutely my experience! I look back over three and bit years and review what has happened in my churches. The churches are now more realistic about the state they are in. They are more ready to look through clear, as opposed to rose-coloured, spectacles at themselves and the challenges that lie ahead. PCCs are business-like. There is a wider spectrum of people involved in the running of the churches—not wide enough, but better than it was three years ago when too many activities were dependent on too few people. Some people may not like the fact that power is slipping through their fingers. They may not like that fact that their opinion which once counted for so much now counts for no more and no less than that of everyone else. I see fewer barriers than there were. I'm proud of that. In my previous job I was described as an agent of change. I'm pleased with that, not least because that is exactly how I see Our Lord's ministry.

I've provoked a handful of parishioners to begin to explore their vocation to a deeper ministry. I've provoked people to study Holy Scripture and see how to apply it to life today. I have, I hope, encouraged people to take the liturgy more seriously: more worship and less trivializing entertainment, and in that worship not to lose a sense of fun. I hope I've encouraged people to live with delight and commitment, and to enjoy their humanity. As the barriers come down, as we leave the inclosure of fat, we become more open to the delights of being fully human, fully ourselves—and that is the way to becoming divine.

Over the last month I've had a fair number of well-wishing cards, emails and messages, mostly from nonchurch people whose baptisms, weddings, or funerals I've done, and from people who read my writings. I seem to have the gift of engaging the unchurched as much as I discomfit some of the churchied. I wonder which is more important for the future of the church. I comfort the disturbed, and disturb the comfortable. I have my priorities right. Other messages have been less welcome. Someone said last week that he was sorry I had not enjoyed myself in Barlow. This is rubbish. Where do these rumours come from? The Barlow rumour-mill is strong. Ignore it. It's part of the attitude that erects barriers of gossip to exclude those who, like the woman at the well, make us uncomfortable.

Jesus' own story has so many elements that strike me as true because they speak of the way people are, as I am. And it's that honesty, that authenticity, that is attractive. It's the sight of wounds that tell us a person is speaking from experience, with freshness and straightforwardness. It's that lack of guile that attracts people to Jesus, makes them feel secure around him, and it's all of that in us that gives each of us the ability to serve those in distress, to provide the safety of the sheepfold.

I can only do my work effectively if I'm honest about myself. 'Here in honesty of preaching': in sermons, I hope I've never been holier than thou. I've never said anything that isn't true for me. It's expensive because I have to go deep down inside myself, look honestly at personal issues that confront me. When we face up to and recognise our faults, then the opportunity comes for the spirit to change us. Confronting ourselves is essential, and necessary before confronting others—motes and beams. Those who are aware of their own imperfection are inevitably the most tender, compassionate, and understanding of others who are bruised or weak. It is the self-righteous who are not suited to God's purpose.

I ask you to welcome my successor without qualification, and be open to what he brings, because the church needs renewal. I've done what I can to show the way, now it's time for you to move with someone else to guide—or maybe under your own steam. One of you said last week that 'we're only beginning to get used to you'. If that's true, then it certainly is time I moved on. If we find the church simply existing for the comfort of the complacent, the sooner it dies, the better.

T S Eliot

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Since May 2008 you've entertained and provoked me as I have, I hope, entertained and provoked you. I thank you for the fun we have had together, the joy and delight. And remember this, without joy and delight, we are in hell. That indeed was St Isaac's definition of hell. Joy and Charity, JC, Jesus Christ. Listen to George Herbert:

As on a window late I cast mine eye,
I saw a vine drop grapes with *J* and *C*
Anneal'd on every bunch. One standing by
Ask'd what it meant. I (who am never loth
To spend my judgement) said, It seem'd to me
To be the bodie and the letters both
Of *Joy* and *Charitie*; Sir, you have not miss'd,
The man reply'd; It figures *JESUS CHRIST*

Sisters and brothers:

Go raibh maith agaibh
Slán agus beannacht leat
Bail ó Dhia ort
Thank you
the grace of God be with you
God bless you