

Sermon by Rod Prince
Trinity 4 17.07.11

May God open our hearts to his will and may I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

Though the heel of the strong oppressor
May grind the weak to dust
And the voices of the fame with one acclaim
May call him great and just
Let those who applaud take warning
And keep this motto in sight
No question is ever settled
Until it is settled right

So runs a poem from Eva Wheeler Wilcox

The readings tonight on the judgement of Solomon and the reluctant though eventually just behaviour of the Jewish elders and priests towards Peter and the other disciples are apt in a week when our thoughts have been about judgement and justice. The news items surrounding phone hacking by journalists, the exoneration of the pilots of the Chinook helicopter after a long campaign to clear their names; the Kenyan refugee camp closed to people who need its facilities because it might encourage more to follow. All of these direct our thoughts to the last words of the poem "No question is ever settled until it is settled right".

Now I don't know about you but even as a child I found the story of the judgement of Solomon hard to swallow. Would any woman really have agreed to have a child cut in two, whether it was hers or not unless she was severely mentally unstable? If only justice was so easy to administer.

But the story does illustrate a number of important points. "Justice is truth in action" said Benjamin Disraeli (rather rich one might think coming from a politician!). And it should be universal; which is what is displayed in this account. Before the most powerful man in Israel come two of the lowest, the most despised people; two prostitutes, to plead their case. They are heard and they receive justice. Solomon, not only the mightiest but also the wisest person in Israel hears their case. Their social standing, their occupations are set aside. The case is judged on its merits, impartially and judgement is reached. The account then shows us truth in action, a model of how justice should be administered. Sadly it is a model and not reality. The world is very different.

Because, a quick scan of the papers reveals that such ready justice as dispensed by Solomon is a very scarce commodity. We see people in the Middle East in Syria, in Bahrain, and around the world; crying out for their human rights to be honoured; for justice to be served. Their cry is echoed in the words of the psalm tonight
"But I am poor and needy, hasten to me, O God! You are my help and deliverer O Lord, do not delay!

And they and we are tempted to say "Where is God in all this; why is He so deaf to those who cry for justice?" And you know what? God might well turn round and ask the same question of us! Humans have a marvellous ability to believe that it is always others and never themselves that are at fault. By blaming others we can by slight of hand instantly exonerate ourselves of all faults; which is why, of course, we are so quick to accuse. Why are we so deaf to the cries of those calling for justice?

Because however we like to portray it we are all complicit in denying others justice.

We are complicit by our silence (keep your head down)
We are complicit by our prurience (it is our unhealthy wish to invade others' privacy that creates a market for those papers. We are co-conspirators by funding others to hack into the lives of others)
We are complicit by our apathy – Kenya is such a long way away
We are complicit by our fear (how many politicians have kept quiet for fear that they would themselves become targets)
We are complicit by our prejudice (refugees don't have rights and super stars get what they deserve)
We are complicit by our selfishness (why should I change what I do for others)

The same considerations that the priests and elders take into account when dealing with Peter and the disciples are, sadly enough, the same considerations we see politicians weighing up as they consider how to go forward with the phone hacking scandal. How will it play with the crowd? What course of action is the most expedient rather than what is the right thing to do? How can we silence the whistle blowers?

But it is not just the politicians; for in these news stories we are also called to examine the extent to which we are guilty by association. Do we turn off the news when revelations of people's private lives are broadcast or do we turn up the volume so we don't miss anything? Why do we buy the papers we do; are we really after an insightful view of the world, and if we say, "Of course!", we know that even the broadsheets have learnt that their readers are not averse to the odd scandalous scoop to help digest the heavy stuff. It helps to rest the eyes and quicken the pulse.

As Christians we are called to be God's agents in the world. When we ask indignantly "Where is God in all this?" the search for an answer begins with where are we? When we say "What is God doing about this?" then we need only to look at our motionless legs, our arms by our sides and our silent tongues for the answer. There is no difference in blaming God and blaming ourselves.

Being a champion for justice is not without cost; it is often an impediment to advancement. Those of you who watched or read about Rumpole of the Bailey; a barrister with a love of justice and poetry will know that his principled stands worked against his elevation to the status of QC rather than for it. If we see injustice in our workplace how often do we stand up and blow the whistle? It does not have to be on a par with phone hacking. Perhaps it is bullying at work or unequal treatment, or blame wrongly attributed. It is still injustice.

So before we rush to point the finger in an attempt to divert blame whether it is onto others or the deity Himself; let's just pause and remember the words of Micah which open Remembrance Day services every year.

"And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God"

This week let us put down our papers, switch off the 24 hour news, take a break and walk humbly with our God; enjoy the peace of His presence and ask that all those affected by these stories; the good and those we have made bad by our actions may know the peace of His presence also

"And keep this motto in sight
No question is ever settled
Until it is settled right"

Amen