

Sermon based on Matthew 15: 10-28

preached at Martin Way on the evening of 14th August 2011 and as a reflection on the violent disturbances witnessed on the streets of London and other UK towns and cities during the preceding week.

What took place on the streets was undoubtedly scandalous and the source of deep embarrassment - and no little anger - to all who witnessed it. It's no wonder then that almost immediately there came calls for a robust response and stern action to be taken.

But if tempted to just ignore what was happening in the hope that the problem would just go away, Jesus was (for once) sadly misguided. The Canaanite woman, however much she knew she was despised, however much she knew that Jesus and his friends were not wanting to fraternise with her, however much she knew that she was breaking a religious and social code in approaching him, persisted and persisted because she was desperate.

The scenes witnessed this past week on the streets of London and in a number of other cities around the country were arguably more scandalous still. For whilst a social code was again being broken - with people attacking their own communities - this was code-breaking of an altogether more sinister nature. The mindless violence that lead to the destruction not only of property but also of human life and livelihoods was truly frightening and all of us, I'd suspect, wondered when and where it was all going to end.

It was then more than understandable that anger surfaced and surfaced very quickly: people were angry at what was happening and directed their anger at politicians (who'd had the audacity to be on holiday during their, well, summer holidays), at the police for not responding quickly enough or with enough force, at the parents of the rioters and looters for not controlling their children and, of course, at the rioters and looters themselves.

And here, understandably, and given the 24/7 media coverage that the riots and looting received, it wasn't difficult to find people calling for a robust response and for stern action. As an example, and on BBC 2's Newsnight programme on Wednesday, a visibly angry Kelvin MacKenzie (former editor of *The Sun*) said there was 'nothing to understand', called for the use of plastic and rubber bullets, spoke of 'scumbags' whom he wanted to see 'face the full force of the law' and receive in the courts the kind of sentences that will 'make them quiver' and see them 'weep in the dock'. So intense was the anger for a while that it was almost impossible for anyone to raise the question of causes. When later on the same programme, Harriet Harman MP (amongst other things Deputy Leader of the Labour Party) whilst condemning the violence made a fumbling attempt to make connections between the violence and government policy, Michael Gove (MP for Surrey Heath and Secretary of State for Education) was incandescent and labelled her arguments as ludicrous, fatuous and demeaning. It was perhaps too soon to start that conversation.

It's a natural instinct to want to punish or somehow banish those who've made our lives uncomfortable and in the heat of the moment, it's far from easy to speak of or hear others speak of the need for understanding. But, however satisfying it might be to hear of high numbers of arrests and sentences, and however right it is that those convicted of violent crime and who present a danger to society receive custodial sentences (currently over 1000/700 respectively), try to understand why we've been confronted by this violence we must if we're to have any hope of avoiding it breaking out again.

Now that the violence has ceased, people are slowly beginning to seek answers to the ‘Why?’ question and they’re acknowledging that the problem is multi-layered and complex and that solutions will be as well. I’m not daft enough to think that that I have the answers but one thing I do know is that we can’t now just carry on as if nothing has happened and ignore those issues at the heart of the problem. And I believe wholeheartedly that the Church should do what it can to be part of the solution.

In many ways the Church’s starting point isn’t a good one for, like the banks, Parliament and the Police, the Church is an institution that’s widely mistrusted. But maybe here’s an opportunity to turn things around so that we’re better placed in future to reach people with the good news of God’s love as revealed in Jesus Christ.

And, since we’re members of the Church, the body of Christ on earth, and people who’re called to be Christ to others, we’d perhaps do well to take note of Jesus’ response to the Canaanite woman. For whilst he was clearly unwilling to engage with her to begin with - because, like us, he’d grown within and been shaped by a particular culture with its own set of values and prejudices - that wasn’t the end of the story. Despite the pleas of those around him to banish this indigenous woman so despised by the people of Israel, he, because of her persistence, ultimately ends up listening to her and taking seriously her complaint. What she says is clearly enough to challenge his own preconceived ideas for Jesus subsequently praises her, responds with compassion and the outcome is one of healing.

Now don’t get me wrong, I’m absolutely not saying that there’s a direct comparison to be drawn between the Canaanite woman and those who’ve wreaked havoc on our streets this week. Clearly there’s not - there’s a huge difference (if you’ll forgive me playing a little with the language used by Matthew) between begging for the crumbs underneath someone’s table and breaking in and taking the table and everything on it. Or just torching the property, so that no one gets to eat from the table or indeed see the table again. What I am suggesting is that there shouldn’t be a disconnect between Jesus’ response to the despised of his day and our response to the so-called “scumbags” of our our own day.

And that means that, however despised those people responsible for the recent disturbances are in our society (and, I guess, however despicable their actions), however reluctant we might be to engage with people so very different from ourselves (I know that not everyone arrested fits this stereotype, but you know what I mean) and however uncomfortable it might make us feel to do so, this story about Jesus shows us (doesn’t it?) that it’s only when we engage with others, however different, listen to them and take seriously what they share with us (however implausible or ludicrous it might at first sound)that we can discover new ways of living - new ways of living that’ll ultimately lead to healing in people’s lives and for society as a whole.

Now I know that such an altruistic idea this sounds dangerously like David Cameron during his ‘hug-a-hoodie’ phase and I know that this alone won’t solve all society’s problems. I know that, should we brave enough to engage in such a way, we might still disagree profoundly with what we hear and want to challenge it - not everyone will be able to put forward as coherent and persuasive an argument as the Canaanite woman. But showing genuine interest in and concern for the lives of marginalised and disenfranchised isn’t an option for the Church, it’s an imperative. If ‘Jesus came to seek and save the lost’ as another gospel writer informs us, then surely seeking and saving the lost is our task too. And if these riots do nothing else, they surely send out the loudest of cries for help, and a

cry that shouts from the top of those buildings still standing or echoes through the ruins of those that don't, and to anyone with ears to listen, 'We're lost'.

There'll be other things we'll need to do - amongst them we'll need to take seriously as church communities our responsibility to play a part in the raising of children rather than seeing it as the role of parents alone, we'll need to provide both safe places in which children and young people can grow and develop and good role models to help them as they do. We'll need to challenge and not collude with a worldview that says that problems can be solved with violence (so hitting kids to teach them a lesson is still out because it merely teaches them the wrong lesson), we'll need to challenge and not collude with a worldview that says 'Do what you can get away with' and we'll need to challenge and not collude with a worldview that says 'You are what you own' or 'You are what you wear'. No doubt there'll be many, many more things we'll need to do besides. This problem is like an onion, take away one layer and another is revealed and each one makes you want to weep. And there are no simple answers. But we have to start somewhere. And if we want to bring about change and healing in people's lives, in our society and in our world, then overcoming our own prejudices, stepping out of our comfort zone, engaging with those that no one else is interested in and acting with love and compassion toward them seems to me to be not only such a place but also the Christ-like thing to do.