

**14<sup>th</sup> August 2011**  
**Trinity 8**

**10 am, HC**

**Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8**  
**Romans 11: 1-2a, 29-32**  
**Matthew 15: 21-28**

## **Prayer**

*‘maintain justice and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come..’*

What is happening to our world?

It would be quite wrong this morning to ignore the events that have occurred in the last week in our towns and cities. Unprecedented acts of violence, hatred, looting and lawlessness on a scale previously unknown in this land. I guess we have all recoiled in horror as we watched CCTV images played on our tv screens, blackberries, phones and laptops of people, many of them youths, stampeding the Police, looting shops and bragging about their gains.

The social networking media enabled mass gatherings in a variety of places and the Police and Emergency services, working flat out, were at times overwhelmed. It seems that in places anarchy reigned.

It was my hairdresser who first told me about the filmed incident that she watched on a friends phone of the young Malaysian man apparently helped by a group of young men, who then openly stole from his rucksack. There was film of a young man heard saying, ‘let’s get some watches...’. And most shameful of all we saw film of a man who had tried to help being beaten up in the street – and who has since died in hospital. Four others have lost their lives, as well as the man whose death apparently sparked it all off.

The courts are now working overtime to process the hundreds of arrests made. Some politicians seem to be at loggerheads with each other. Yet again the Police have been criticised and the media is playing its part to both inform and inflame the situation. Everyone seems to have an opinion about what happened: it was the fault of the Police, particularly the Met., it is due to the recession (I heard someone try to argue on the radio that those doing the looting were poor), it was going to happen whatever....

Whatever... it was appalling, it was very frightening and demonstrated the absolute baseness to which human beings can stoop – totally disregarding the basic human rights of their fellow beings. Such that some people are now homeless, jobless, have lost everything except their lives. And juxtaposed with these events in our own country the same

newsbroadcasts were reporting on the worsening of the famine in the horn of Africa. Heartrending images showed far larger numbers of people who had been forced through hunger to leave all they had behind in the search for food. And political instability and human greed exacerbates their situation.

So what is the world coming to?

Well, probably not much different to what it has always been in different ways and places throughout history. What we have seen in our own land this last week has reminded us that humans are humans and have a propensity for sheer selfishness and given the right (or wrong) circumstances will revert to almost animal behaviour. This week it was very close to home.

Throughout the course of Biblical history we can trace similar behaviours in various times and from various peoples. Which is perhaps why God needs to keep reminding his people of the need for justice and moral behaviour.

In the passage that we heard this morning from Isaiah society was also in a mess. The date was about 520 BCE. The Hebrew people were returning to their own land and to the city of Jerusalem following 40 years in Exile. But the city was a shambles and needed rebuilding. The people's faith was in tatters. They knew they were God's chosen people but the exile had worn down their faith and they had a low opinion of the foreigners who had captured them.

Now God was gathering them back and verse 1 reminds them of God's supremacy and his moral demand on their lives too. ' Thus says the Lord:

maintain justice and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come and my deliverance will be revealed'. They – and we – are reminded that God is supreme, presidential, in control: THUS says the Lord – and he says it with authority. What follows is a defining pair – two halves of a sentence that complement each other. First there is an imperative from God to the people, a command: maintain justice and do what is right. That was crucial as they started to re-build their own land. And the corollary of doing that was a promise: for my salvation WILL come and my deliverance be revealed. All will be well – God will save and prosper his people – but they must play their part too. God and humanity work together, in tandem, divine imperative and promise will lead to re-building and hope.

But there was more to it than that, the rest of the passage must have shocked the Hebrew people,

for they were told that the divine promise was to all people, not just the chosen few. All people will be encouraged to share the faith of the Jews and be gathered into the homeland – a land that would now be for all. And we read in this passage a verse that should be familiar to us from much later when Jesus quotes it in the temple: ‘my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples’, the Lord says.

As we build on the foundations of our OT ancestors, clearly the Christian faith is one which is about the moral imperative to ‘do justice’ and to embrace all people. That is the point that St Paul is making in chapters 9-11 of his letter to the Romans, of which we heard just a bit this morning. The early Christians in Rome were trying to work out how Gentiles fitted into the greater scheme of things in the church. Paul sketches in the whole 3 chapters a kind of history

of humankind with the image of a vine and branches being grafted in and chopped off. Here he tells the Romans that God has not rejected them, they are still the true vine, but that by the grace of God others are now grafted in and must be recognised and treated as full members.

That was the point being made in the remarkable story in today’s gospel reading as Jesus meets with the SyroPhonician woman and welcomes her into the faith too.

This is one time in the gospels when Jesus leaves Jewish territory totally and seeks peace and space in the northern area of Phonicia – right up by the coast. His reputation must have gone before him as even there he is followed by a woman with a need. Her daughter is ill and she recognises that he is the Messiah and clamours for help. We may be shocked at the response of

the disciples, and Jesus initially. In the translation we have the disciples urge Jesus to send her away, but the Greek phrase can equally mean, give her what she wants. An interesting motive for care and help – oh do it for her, shut her up, and let's get rid of her. Hmm – are we ever like that!

Jesus himself is also sharp with her at first. 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. She pleaded a bit more. 'it's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs' – a huge insult as the gentiles were often known as dogs – the lowest term for anyone. But the word Jesus uses is *kunaria* the word used for pet dogs so maybe he is softening a bit. And then her faith wins him over – even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters table. She puts herself in the lowest position but still has

faith that he will help her. And so he does. And the outsider and outcast is welcomed and helped.

And of course today we still use that woman's words in one of our prayers before communion when we say to God, 'we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs from under your table, but you Lord are the God of all mercy...' in saying that prayer we recognise our humility and God's grace.

I think this morning's readings speak into the current situation in this land, and elsewhere. They are concerned with the gathering in of the outcast and the outsider to the community of faith. They are about including all people and they are about justice. It was heartening to read in the Church Times how many church congregations in London and other cities have

been helping in the rebuilding and caring for communities this week.

I think the church and individual Christians have a key role to play in enabling us to move on as a country and as human beings. Walter Brugemann, an OT scholar comments on the Isaiah passage:

(Is comm. P. 173)

Our own parish is a microcosm of society – multi faith, multi cultural and widely different social strands. I believe that we have a responsibility in the place where we are to maintain justice and to offer God’s salvation to all. That does not mean seeking to convert those who have a faith of their own, but working together to gather into one mutually caring community, all people, under God’s rule. We must pray and we must work for a society, a parish, where people honour each other and where there is hope and fullness of life:

*‘maintain justice and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come..*

Amen