

St Andrew's Chesterton

14 August 2011; 8th after Trinity

Isaiah 56.1, 6-8; Matthew 15.10-28

When people return to land after a voyage at sea they sometimes speak of having returned to terra firma, to the stable, solid ground after days of weeks of instability and being at the mercy of the elements. Terra firma is solid ground, reliable, dependable, immovable. So when the earth, the terra, itself starts to move, ceases to be firm, that can be a profound shock not just physically but psychologically, emotionally, even spiritually. But when you think of what the planet earth is made, that the earth's crust sits on a rather plastic or fluid mantle and that sits on a liquid outer core, then realise that our sense of terra firma is not only not to be taken for granted but almost miraculous. An earthquake or an eruption of a volcano reminds us of those shifting tectonic plates and the seething, burning cauldron that lies beneath our feet. To me it's a miracle that catastrophic events caused by our volatile planet happen as infrequently as they do.

I think the same about human societies where we have built up a solid crust of law and order and often forget that underneath, beneath the surface, there are vast forces of destruction that can burst out through the crust at its vulnerable points or when the tectonic plates of human history have shifted in a particular way. In these past days there have been many theories as to why now this has happened: the police handling of a particular incident, the current economic uncertainties, decreased social mobility and an underclass that can see no way out, the silly season of summer when we are used to outbreaks of feverish behaviour (remember the disorder over petrol prices a few years ago?); then there's social networking, gang culture, the increasingly materialist and consumerist society we live in. All these things may have something to do with it but I suspect any one-line answers are likely to be too simplistic.

Putting aside the clever social explanations we have been confronted with some examples of human behaviour that have shocked and appalled us – the levels of human greed and disregard for others, the sight of an injured man caught on cctv being mugged by those who were pretending to help him, the murderous running down of three men seeking to protect the livelihoods and property of others.

Jesus challenged a religiosity that was based on ritual cleanliness and the rules that go with it. He said that it's not what goes into your mouth that defiles but what comes out, for what comes out of our mouths is an outpouring from our centres, our hearts. We are, if you like, all like the earth we live on – on the outside we may seem solid and reliable, but what lies deep within? 'Out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what

defile a person.’ At the core of human nature lies what is fiery, sulphurous, highly dangerous and life-threatening. A few tectonic plates shift and out it spews. And, if I’m honest, I know that that’s true of me. OK, I’ve never done any of the stuff we’ve been seeing or hearing about in the news, but I know just from comparatively small tectonic shifts in my life and how I respond that a spiritual and moral volcanic eruption is quite possible in me. There is lots in here that most of the time I have a pretty good hold on but it’s there, a volatile, seething, dangerous mass waiting to break out. Even the most solid, dependable, rock-like person is like the earth, the terra firma, probably, 99.999% probably, reliable for always, but you never know for certain.

The Christian faith takes the reality of human sin very seriously, and it does not allow us to see it just as somebody else’s problem. It is universally a human problem and societies and systems that seek to bring people together – as they rightly should – without recognising the problem of the human heart will always be doomed to fail. It’s a well-used expression but it bears repeating, ‘the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart’.

Isaiah’s vision of Jerusalem and its temple is a universal one. As he dreams of a restored city he pictures not just his exiled fellow-citizens returning to Zion in a great and joyful gathering of the dispersed, but he sees – and this is an extraordinarily generous vision for one steeped in the idea of the exclusiveness of Israel – he sees foreigners coming too and joining in this great gathering:

‘and the foreigners... these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.’

I view that rather puzzling scene in our gospel reading when Jesus seems to need persuading that a Gentile woman is worthy of healing as Jesus as it were being representative Israel which at this moment must learn to turn away from its previous exclusivism and learn to embrace the foreigner as a brother or sister of equal value and worth. And that is what the early church – though it struggled with it initially – also came to realise, that in Christ ‘there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’ (Galatians 3.28)

I believe that also means having a high regard and respect for those of other faiths, not least the three religions that look to Abraham as father – Judaism and Islam as well as Christianity. Some of you will know that I have been reading a book on the history of Jerusalem and it is easy to be depressed by all the blood and carnage that has been inflicted by adherents of each faith upon those of the other two. Sadly the image we in the Christian or perhaps post-Christian west have had of Islam has been dominated by the Jihadist and terrorist, so if there has been a saving grace (and I sue

that phrase advisedly) in these past days it has been the sight of a clearly devout muslim man – in the middle of Ramadan – displaying immense dignity and courage in standing before his local community and the world pleading for calm. Following the murder of his son Tariq Jahan said: "Today, we stand here to call to all the youth to remain calm, for our communities to stay united."

He later said: "I have lost my son - if you want to lose yours step forward, otherwise calm down and go home."

Wasn't that a turning point this week? A senseless and wicked killing followed by such a response. It reminds me of 'Father forgive them; they know not what they do'.

In Isaiah's vision of the great coming together at Jerusalem, at the heart of it, in the midst of the temple, and at the centre of activity was the altar of sacrifice. The shedding of blood seems to us unappealing, even barbaric as a religious ritual, but it was a reminder of the costliness of sin and the need for it to be properly dealt with. This week, as is often the case, it has been the shedding of innocent blood that has shocked us back into some kind of normality; it is as though the riotous outbreak could only be quelled by sacrifice, as though all that outbreak of bile and viciousness and greed required a scapegoat, a victim or victims for order to be restored again. You may be interested to know that this is precisely the theory of the French historian and philosopher of social science, Rene Girard, and has influenced how some modern theologians understand what we call the atonement – which means why Jesus died and what it means to say that he died to save us from our sins. But therein is not just another sermon but a whole series.