

Sermon for Holy Trinity Geneva on Sunday 11 August 2024 – 11th Sunday after Trinity

Texts: 1 Kings 19.4-8; Psalm 34.1-8; Ephesians 4.25-5.2; John 6.35, 41-51

Stones to destroy or bread to feed?

Watching the news this week has filled me with a number of emotions ranging from horror and grief to wonder, hope and expectation. From the riots in Bangladesh which have left so many dead yet ushered in a new and potentially peaceful new government, the continuing conflict in Ukraine and Russia, the race riots in the UK, the tribulations of the US elections to the wonder of the Olympic Games and a new medical development which looks set to revolutionise lives.

But of these, the thing which has most disturbed me this week has been the race riots in the UK. Partly, I know, this is because I am British, I know and can visualise many of these cities in which this violence is taking place and in some cases, I have seen this spiral of violence taking place there in previous summers. I am aware that for many of us here, who are from so many parts of the world, these events must feel light years away in the context of peaceful Geneva.

However, I believe that these riots in some way, represent a choice which is before each one of us, every day of our lives, wherever we happen to live. We may also have experienced similar events in our own country. That choice is whether we choose, in the decisions and actions which we take each day, to build and nurture or to hurt and destroy. These choices lie at the heart of our Bible readings today and not surprisingly for they reflect to us, the daily reality of the decisions which we as humans, have to make and the consequences. But our readings today also show where God is at work in this process and how this is both a source of hope for us but also a direct challenge to us.

But let's return briefly to these riots and what happened. They were sparked by a tragedy which happened on 29th July in the town of Southport in NW England. A 17-year old youth suddenly appeared at a Taylor-Swift themed holiday dance group for young children. He stabbed three little girls to death and severely wounded a number of others. The community was left reeling with shock and sorrow.

But what happened next was even more shocking. False posts on social media implied that there had been a racial element to the attack. Mosques and other communities were attacked, the violence spread rapidly to other cities and the police became the subject of heavy violence. Far right groups have been involved in street battles with those taking part in anti-racism demonstrations. And at the same time, local residents have seen huge damage inflicted on the communities and have been unable to take part in their normal daily activities.

Subsequent analysis by the BBC and other analysts has revealed that much of the false information was spread by social media channels including those who earn

their money by the number of posts they issue. The latter, whilst not necessarily consciously posting false information, do not take time to verify the accuracy of the information they issue. So from these sparks, this terrible violence has erupted.

“So what does this have to do with us?”, you may well ask? “We’ve have done none of these things”.

The answer is because many things in our lives start in a small way. Who we are, what we become, how we contribute or diminish to our families, communities, churches and where we work, depends vitally on the decisions, those choices we make every day. And these in turn, are particularly influenced by two things. First of all, on that which shapes our vision of the world and second, the extent to which we do or don’t discipline ourselves in our responses and our actions.

St Paul is very clear in writing to the brittle and often fractious Christian community at Ephesus how their choices will make or break their life together. He urges them to stand up for truth and to strive for justice; to be generous and hard-working rooted on the love of God. He reminds them that the inspiration for all they do is the knowledge that they are beloved by God and are sealed by the Spirit of God. Because they are precious in God’s sight and have been forgiven and redeemed by Christ, they are now called by God to be a source of life and hope in their community.

This means, as St Paul points out to them, that they will need to be both disciplined and proactive in their behaviour - consciously resisting the temptation to gossip, malign one another, nurse resentment and jealousy in their hearts or condone wrong-doing. They will only be able to do this by seeking God’s help every day to make a conscious effort every day to put this into effect. For only in this way, can the habits of grace can grow within us.

This is true for us as well. For we are sealed by God through our Baptism as his beloved children and called by him to build up and bring hope to others in the world, not diminish and destroy them. To do this, we too, like the Ephesians, need to build up these habits of grace whilst recognising all the time, our own weaknesses and capacity to deceive ourselves. Something which can really help us with this is the practice taught by the great Jesuit saint, St Ignatius of Loyola which he called the *Examen* or in English, daily review of how we have lived. It is the practice of consciously reviewing in our prayers at the end of each day, all that we have thought and done that day in the light of Christ and asking for God’s grace to learn from this.

Sometimes, we too will be challenged by God to stand up for what is right and true in the face of injustice and opposition as our Bible readings today show us. Elijah provoked the wrath of King Ahab and his wife Queen Jezebel when he challenged the false gods of Baal whom they worshipped. In a similar way, Jesus angers both the religious leaders and also some members of his own community when he witnessed to them how God’s love was revealed in him – that life-giving bread offered for the salvation of the world.

And both the reaction of Elijah and also that of David as recalled in our psalm today, shows us just how hard it can be to hold on in faith when we are under attack. Elijah, worn out by standing up for God and destroying the prophets of Baal, has to flee

from the wrath of Jezebel into the desert. At the stage we encounter him today, he is in extremis and he has virtually lost the will to live. In a similar way our psalm today recalls how David had to flee the murderous wrath of King Saul. Although David was fiercely loyal, Saul nursed an insane jealousy of him and tried to kill him.

Yet in the midst of their crisis, God makes it clear that they are not alone. He encounters Elijah, feeds him with life-giving bread and water, reveals himself to him as God in the midst of the desert and then gives him a new commission. David also encounters God at his lowest point who shows to him that he will deliver him so that he may bring life, justice and hope to his people.

Jesus faced radical choices right at the very start of his ministry when he was tempted by the devil to turn stones into bread for his own ease, to win power over people's hearts by acts of magic and to hold that power by force by throwing in his lot with the devil. He showed us clearly, through his decisive responses to the devil, that the choices God calls humankind to make are those based on love and offering ourselves for others.

As we've heard in St John's Gospel today, one of the images which Jesus used to help us understand what this means in practice, is revealing himself as the bread of life. He proclaims that "*The bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh*" (John 6.51). In the Feast of the Transfiguration which we celebrated last week, we glimpsed the future glory of Jesus as the eternal Son of God, who offers himself for us on the Cross to be life-giving bread to redeem and nourish the world. He invites us too, as his followers, to be bread for the world also, bringing a vision of light, hope and renewal in all places of darkness.

Yet whether we do this or not will depend on what we choose. Will we be those who throw stones and destroy? Or will we be those who offer bread and build up?

The Eucharist which we will share together in a few minutes, brings this choice into sharp focus for us. This week, the Catholic development agency CAFOD, reminded us of the witness and teaching of the great saint, Archbishop Oscar Romero. He was murdered in his own cathedral in El Salvador in the very act of celebrating the Mass, by government forces. They were infuriated by his courageous witness for truth and human rights in the face of the murder, oppression and fear in that country.

Archbishop Romero taught his people that the Eucharist is a call to action – not just something we receive just our own solace. For as we receive the grace of Christ's flesh given for us, so Christ in turn commissions us to go out, offering ourselves to be bread for the world with all the vulnerability which this involves.

This week, amidst all the violence, bitterness and hatred, we've also glimpsed signs of hope and grace. Examples which have struck me have included not just the remarkable dedication and skill of the Olympic athletes but also the generosity of the volunteers at the Olympic Games – all those young people who have come from all over the world to offer their time and love freely, so that those visiting and participating in the Olympics were cared for well and were safe. I glimpsed it in the courage of those who have come out throughout many parts of the UK to protect their communities and police against the violence of Far Right extremists and have

made it clear that those of all faiths and nationalities are welcome. I glimpsed it in the kindness of those who have crowd-funded the replacement of a children's library and community resource centre in a poor area of Liverpool destroyed by rioters. I've glimpsed it in news that through the dedication of scientists, a new cure is now available to help those suffering from beta thalassaemia, a genetic disease which makes it difficult for the body to provide enough haemoglobin to carry oxygen around the body, which threatens life expectancy.

We have before us such opportunities to make a difference. Will we be a stone which causes pain or life-giving bread through the choices we make in the week ahead?

Amen