

## **What comes out of the human heart** **A sermon by Revd Richard Carter**

**Rom.11.1-20, 29-32; Matt 15.10-28**

Our Gospel reading today falls into two parts. The first part is dealing with Jewish eating habits and how the oral and ceremonial law should be kept; what foods are clean and what foods are forbidden. The second part of our Gospel relates to the miraculous healing of a Canaanite woman's daughter. What can possibly be the relevance of these passages and Christ's teaching to our present context? Well, in both parts, Christ is breaking through the most fanatically held prejudices of his time to reveal deeper truths.

Christ begins by trying to disentangle the authentic truths about God from all the ceremonial law and legal and cultural practices that had grown up around these truths. The Pharisees had developed a whole fence of traditions and additions to protect their law. Of course ritual eating, what was eaten and the cleanliness of food was absolutely vital for a nomadic people as the Book of Leviticus shows, but written and oral law and rituals can easily get separated from meaning and become laws unto themselves. Jesus is trying to get beyond the externals by which we create divisiveness and return to the core truth, the truth about our relationship with God. And Jesus has some tough things to say. Quite bluntly he says, defilement is not about what you eat, what goes into your mouth or what comes out the other end. What you have really got to consider is what comes out of your heart; not the externals, but the values and relationships, the actions that come out of the very core of your humanity. And here Jesus is no sentimental idealist who believes in a state of natural innocence. He sees the brutal reality. Out of the heart, he says, come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander, and these defile a person.

If you ever wanted to witness to the hard truth of what Jesus is saying, then this has been the week. In a country which we thought believed in civilised democracy and universal education, and health for all, justice, and equal opportunity, we have witnessed the sad spectacle of what can also come out of the human heart. It has been salutary. We have all seen the pictures or perhaps even been close enough to feel the fear. The smashing, the wanton destructiveness, the fever of greed, as so many people got caught up in the adrenalin of looting and desire for instant gratification through theft. For a few days we saw the demons that can come out of the human heart and they are frightening and ugly. Last Thursday, the clergy in this area were invited to a briefing with Chief Superintendent Simon Ovens who is responsible for all the policing of Westminster and beyond. He told us that the last week had been the worst thing he had seen in 25 years of policing. What he said was most stunning for him was the level of violence shown towards the Police force by young children between the ages of 12 and 17. He said that at that

moment in time it was as though they had no sense at all of the consequence of their actions, however violent. He also described the same phenomenon in gang knife crime. He said, for example, when a young lad was murdered in Victoria it was as though he was being hunted down by a pack of dogs, not young boys. Those were the superintendent's words. They killed him like a pack of dogs. He said that many of the young people had no criminal records. In a moment of adrenalin and violence they have destroyed their whole future lives and the lives of others. For those involved in the riots the saddest thing is he said that by putting them through the criminal justice system it will further criminalise them rather than rehabilitate them. This week our poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy wrote these words in memory of three young men who met their deaths when hit by a speeding car in Birmingham:

After the evening prayer at the mosque  
came the looters in masks  
and you three stood  
beloved in your neighbourhood  
brave bright brothers  
to be who you were –  
a hafiz is one who has memorised the Koran  
a devout man –  
then the man in the speeding car  
who purposefully mounted the kerb...

I think we should all kneel on that English street,  
where he widowed your pregnant wife, Shazad,  
tossed your soul to the air Abdul,  
and brought your father Haroon to his knees,  
his face masked in only your blood  
on the rolling news  
where nobody's children riot and burn.

Jesus says in today's Gospel that it is that which proceeds from the heart that defiles. I think this is so important to remember. You cannot take a category or a blanket term and apply it to all our youth. In different circumstances perhaps those kids could have been any one of us. One of the members of staff on shift at St Martin's told me that the first thing they did was text their daughter out with her friends "where are you?" How many other parents did not feel the same panic? Camila Batmanghelidjh who runs *Kids Company* and works with vulnerable kids in Peckham spoke this same truth on *Question Time*. She said you have to separate the moment these young people engage in the violence from the person they are and can be. These people are not criminals by birth. They are people who have done a crime who have got pulled into the pack, the gang, the greed the rush of the moment. Batmanghelidjh writes 'How, we ask, could they attack their own community with such disregard? But some young people would reply "easily", because they feel they don't actually belong to the community. It's not one occasional attack on dignity, it's a repeated humiliation, being continuously dispossessed in a society rich with possession... Savagery is a possibility within us all.' Some of us have been lucky enough not to have to call upon it for survival; others, exhausted from failure, can justify resorting to it, or do not have the

strength or courage not to be sucked or bullied into it by those they hang out with.

In our second Gospel story for today, Jesus offers hope. We see the hope of healing beyond injustice. A Canaanite woman comes to plead for her daughter, is tormented by a demon: an unclean woman, an unfaithful Canaanite, a Gentile, despised by the Jews, pleading for help for a demonic daughter. Jesus's disciples want to get rid of her: "Send her away"; "She's not our problem." And indeed Jesus himself seems to be filled with the same prejudice in which he calls her a dog. "It is fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs?" he asks. But this woman breaks through the prejudice of her time and challenges the stereotype, the category, the judgement forced upon her and her daughter. "We too," she is saying, "even though you describe us as dogs should like dogs be able to eat the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table." Her cry is the cry of all the dispossessed, the disenfranchised, those whose voices have never ever been really heard or acknowledged. It is the cry of poor neighbourhoods, and blocks of high rise, and dark concrete alleys, stinking of abandonment, and young people who feel they are excluded and have no chance, and no way out or means of making good. Are they not worthy too of some of the crumbs from the rich man's table? How many of them have holidays in Tuscany? Should their children not have a chance too for fullness of life free from the demons? And this woman breaks through the prejudice, there in front of Jesus Christ. She deconstructs the stereotype of an underclass and demands his attention as a human being worthy of help and inclusion – a mother, like other parents, who has a heart too, and a longing for a future for her daughter.

And Jesus changes, changes. She sets him free from the prejudice of his age and allows him to recognise her as a human being, a full human being, with a faith and an equal hope in God's goodness, so that she too can be a chosen one. You see, in Christ you can't just write people off. The last shall be first and the first shall be last: "Woman, great is your faith," says Jesus. "Let it be done as you wish." The Canaanite woman has disclosed the real will of God and made it happen. She is the mother who has persisted against the odds and won.

And this too is the opportunity that this time provides for us and the Church working together with the local people, and the communities we are called to build. The Christian faith is not an optional extra on the curriculum. It underpins the very nature of our lives and the people we want to become, and the moral choices we are called to make. Our faith calls us to deconstruct myth and prejudice and the categories that confine people, and limit them, and lock them in sin and criminality, and discover who they really are and who they can become. It provides a realisation that there are, even for the young, ethical choices to be made, and that our humanity depends on those choices not upon our I-Phone or the size of our flat screen. A society must measure success not simply in terms of material riches, but on its morality, its compassion, its concern for neighbour, its belief that the individual good is inseparably linked with the common good, particularly that of the most vulnerable. Our society will be judged by the values we teach to our children and that applies to bankers and politicians as well as parents.

And there is a Spirit of hope that emerges from the ashes – evident in all faiths and all humanity. Thus a Malaysian, Ashraf Haziq, who had his jaw broken in the riots and possessions stolen from his bag by those pretending to help him can become the sign of forgiveness for our nation, with his gentle lack of malice, with money pouring into him from well-wishers who want to heal the evil done to him and others; or the Tottenham community banding together to clear up the mess, community emerging out of the chaos with countless acts of kindness and generosity; the police working shifts from 7.00am to 2.00am to bring order without violence. And the most powerful witness of all – the father of the young men killed in Birmingham, Tariq Janan, who had tried to resuscitate his dying son, and then turned to all those who wanted revenge for his death and said “Step forward if you want to lose your own sons and daughters. Otherwise calm down and go home please. If you look around here, there are black, brown, white and yellow people. We live together and we can stay together. Our three boys have died. There should be no more deaths, no more destruction, and I hope and pray that this message has got through.”

Yes, from the human heart can come all manner of evil. But from the human heart too, can come the Spirit of God’s hope for the world.

Jesus says: “Great is your faith. Let it happen to you as you wish.” We hold in our hearts that choice.