Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 14 July 2019

11am Christophe Borysiewicz

“How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked”.

What a week it’s been. On Thursday, the England cricket team won their semi-final, the Australian ball tamperers were roundly booed by the crowd and sent on their way, and to top it all off, St Roger of Centre Court won his semi-final and made his way to today’s final. It’s as if the sporting gods had for once being paying attention to Psalm 82:

“*God has taken his place in the divine council;*
in the midst of the gods he holds judgement;
‘How long will you judge unjustly
and show partiality to the wicked?”

Now, we read Psalm 82 together earlier, and that lament from verse 2 and longing for justice for the oppressed is one that we can recognise today. It’s one that echoes in the prophecies of Amos that we heard earlier and it is one that can help us reflect on the parable that we heard from Luke’s Gospel.

But what is justice? and who are the wicked? We can often long for a simple world where there are goodies and baddies, the goodies look like us and win, and the baddies get their just deserts. It’s something which is in all of us and a lens with which we can view our sporting allegiances through. But it’s also something which can be dangerous, and blind us to our own sin. To quote Jonathon Howcroft writing in the Guardian about the Australian ball tampering scandal:

“it’s hard not to consider the…suspended players scapegoats and the whole affair an executive whitewash.”

Two weeks ago, it was London Climate Action Week, sponsored by the Mayor. I went to a conference about the imperative to divest from fossil fuel companies. It was organised by a coalition of charities and campaigning bodies. The day before the National Trust had announced its divestment from fossil fuel producers. The organisers had a simple narrative, for too long the oil companies had been shown partiality, they were not changing their ways and the demands of justice meant that we should sell their shares.

"Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute."

At first glance a simple story of justice with which we all instinctively sympathise, and yet, these were some of the arguments that I was presented with:

"Divestment is about stigmatisation of oil companies"
"We must turn the fossil fuel industry into a villain"
"Make people ashamed to admit to working for these companies at dinner parties"

I left the conference with a distinct feeling of unease. This was a cause which should have been grounded in justice for the weak and the orphan and should have been about maintaining the rights of the lowly and the destitute; yet the language used had not been the language of justice, it had been the language of vengeance, and the phrase which stuck in my mind as I collected my thoughts later was:

"We must turn the fossil fuel industry into a villain"

Those arguing for divestment were not inherently simplistic or vengeful people, they were just people like you or me, and as such longed for the narrative of a simple villain, who could be blamed for the ills of the world. It's so much easier to pin the blame for a ball tampering scandal on a couple of rotten apples, rather than to reflect on a culture which puts winning at any cost above all else.

The next couple of months, the lectionary takes us on a tour of some of the prophets of the Old Testament, starting with Amos this week and next. In our daily language we often think of prophets as those who predict the future, but in Old Testament times prophets could usually be found preaching about the present and warning the people of Israel and its leaders about straying from the path of God and what the consequences of that might be. Or as the hymn we sang put it:

“each from age to age proclaiming, ‘mid the world’s despair and turmoil, God the one, the righteous Lord”.

We might think of those who warn us about climate change and the imperative for us to change as among the prophets of our time.

We live in a time and place of plenty and relative peace, yet also a time with rampant injustices, and Amos prophesied against a similar backdrop. Amos lived in the southern kingdom of Judah, and was not a professional prophet, but a shepherd, who was called to prophesy to the northern kingdom of Israel. Our reading today started with a vision of God measuring, or indeed judging, the people of Israel, and finding them wanting. It then continues with Amaziah, the priest of the Temple of the Northern Kingdom, condemning Amos for his unhelpful and unwanted prophesy against the King. Amaziah wanted to cast Amos as the villain of the piece, for prophesying against Israel and its ruling elites; after all, these were people who had delivered peace and prosperity, what good would upsetting the applecart do? But Amos goes on to deliver a prophesy of God’s judgement against the people of Israel in language that it is deeply uncomfortable to us today.

Such discomfort has echoes for me to my feelings at the conference I attended. Oil & gas companies undoubtedly fuel climate change, the ruling elites of Israel at the time of Amos undoubtedly led and profited from a system that saw some living in great wealth while many lived in great poverty. But does that mean condemnation is the appropriate answer?

Which takes us to the Parable of the Good Samaritan, a story we know very well and which makes its way into secular culture as well as into the Gospels. But before we reflect on that further, I’d like to carry out a quick opinion poll.

Raise your hands if you think that the villain of the parable is the priest who walked on by rather than helping a half dead man?

What about the Levite who did likewise?

What about the robbers – after all, they were the ones who assaulted and stole from the man on the Jericho road?

What about the lawyer who asked the question to try and trick Jesus, which led to the parable?

And who thinks that the villains of the parable are us, sat here in the 21st century today?

'How long will you judge unjustly
and show partiality to the wicked?"

Shall we start with that last one? How could we be the villains of a story in which we don't even appear, and which was set two thousand years ago in a land far far away? Jesus never gave his parables names, we can and do choose the names we call them, and we persist in calling this 'The Parable of the Good Samaritan'. The implication of that name being that all the other Samaritans were not good and were somehow immoral or evil. In biblical times, the Jews and the Samaritans did not get along, even though they were neighbours; there was a lack of trust, strife and intercommunal violence. Hence the choice of the Samaritan as the one who loved his neighbour, this was about challenging the lawyer into thinking about how loving one's neighbour was about how one behaved and not about one's position or what one said in public. Though we should remember that we are called on to love ourselves as well as our neighbours, before we condemn ourselves out of hand.

We then come to the robbers. At one level, they are absolutely villains – they assaulted a seemingly innocent man, stole from him and left him for dead. But are we called on simply to condemn them, or should we try and understand their situation first as well. Could they have been living in a society such as one described by Amos where the wealthy controlled society and kept the poor in a state of perpetual poverty? And would that have made their actions justifiable?

Well if we can't condemn the robbers, and we can't condemn ourselves, surely we can condemn the priest and the Levite. They saw a halfdead man lying by the side of the road on their way to Jericho and they did nothing. I'll take that back, they didn't do nothing; they did something, they crossed over the road to avoid dealing with him.

Now, this is what Martin Luther King had to say on the subject speaking in Memphis Tennessee, the day before he was assassinated:

“That's a dangerous road. In the days of Jesus it came to be known as the "Bloody Pass." And you know, it's possible that the priest and the Levite looked over that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around. Or it's possible that they felt that the man on the ground was merely faking. And he was acting like he had been robbed and hurt, in order to seize them over there, lure them there for quick and easy seizure. And so the first question that the priest asked -- the first question that the Levite asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?"

It’s easy to condemn someone for not helping, and it’s easy to think of occasions when we too have passed by on the other side. I pass homeless people every day on my way to work and then walking around The City. Sometimes I give money to those who beg, mostly I don’t. But I remember talking about this with a friend, and she asked me a question: ‘*What do you think you’re doing when you give money to the homeless?*’

In some ways, it’s easy to use the some of those thoughts from the Parable of the Good Samaritan when answering that question, but then she challenged me: ‘*Are you sure you’re not just applying a salve to your conscience, you profit from a system that sees them homeless, and if you give money to them or to a charity, then you no longer need to worry about that?*’ Challenging words.

And words to remind us that we often see ourselves as the good guys or the victims in a simple story, and in that story is a clear simple unambiguous villain who needs to be judged, and then the situation will resolve itself, and we won’t need to reflect on our own role any more. If only Amos would go back to Judah, then there would be peace in Israel. If only the robbers could be dealt with, then the Jericho Road would be safe. If only the priest and the Levite were good people, then we wouldn’t need to be rescued by those we loathe. If only oil & gas companies changed their ways, then global warming would be solved – there’s nothing that we’d need to do.

I quoted from Martin Luther King earlier, and I stopped halfway through his paragraph – it’s worth carrying on for where we left off:

“And so the first question that the priest asked -- the first question that the Levite asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But then the Good Samaritan came by. And he reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?”"

And so when we think about justice or listen to Psalm 82, we need to avoid the easy seductive trap of justice being something that is about other people's actions, or other people needing to mend their ways, and then reflect on our own lives and where we could change our unjust ways, and challenge the injustices by which we profit:

"*How long will you judge the unjustly*
and show partiality to the wicked?
Give justice to the weak and to the orphan;
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.'