

20TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

a sermon preached by Fr. John-Francis Friendship SCP
at S. Andrew's Church, Romford
Sunday, August 14th, 2011

Isaiah 55:1, 6-8, Roms.11:1-2a,29-32 and Matt.15:21-28

INTRODUCTION

Most mornings, when I wake up, I turn on Radio 4 and listen to the 'Today' programme. It helps me engage with the world. Sometimes I tune in to Radio 3 if I want a more gentle way in to a new day, but mostly I enjoy the cut and thrust of the presenters and their – victims? – as the issues of the world are debated. Politicians are challenged, hypocrisy identified and the interviewers needle away at their subject to find out flaws.

Like many of us, some of those interviewed are challenged by the questioning and react badly. But, then, few of us find it easy to have our views or beliefs challenged. It's uncomfortable to have your standpoint threatened – even undermined and we react in different ways. We can attack the other person's statement, get angry, make some comment that will hurt them. Rarely do we listen without discomfort.

RIOTING AND LAWLESSNESS

Last week, in light of the events that were taking place on some of our streets in some of our cities I posed the question 'Why?' on 'Facebook'. Why did a significant minority of young (and, it seems, not always so young) people take to the streets in a frenzy of violence and looting. Why did the police, at times, seemed almost powerless to stop them? Why did parts of our cities become something akin to war zones with gangs seemingly in control? In the face of such outrageous behaviour we are left with that simple question: why? And, from the responses I received to that question it is clear these events have generated strong reactions – reactions which I find myself sharing. I am aware that I have responded vigorously to scenes of looting, burning and terror on the streets: 'Why can't the police use more force?' 'Let's bring the army in!' 'Punish not just the children (for that, it would seem, is what many are) but the parents!' 'Have we 'spared the rod and spoilt the child'?'

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth!

And then I have wondered at the wider picture. We live in a society that has become detached from faith in God and become obsessed by materialism. We are swamped by advertising that appeals to our envy, that makes us want more things that many can't (and might never) afford. The very wealthy get richer whilst others suffer or are faced by deep cuts and a lack of prospects. And violence, whether to persons or property, seems increasingly accepted as part of our TV, music, computer and internet-fed culture. Like many, I am left confused and uncertain as to how all this might be changed, and whether we even have the desire to change it.

And if I dig a bit deeper I find myself wondering with concern if, as someone wrote: *'Barbarism is the natural state of mankind. Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph.'* (Robert E. Howard, *'Beyond the Black River'*). But one thing is clear. We all have opinions as to the causes of these events and the solutions. And, as far as opinions are concerned, I take note of a quote from Abraham Lincoln: *'Public opinion, though often formed upon a wrong basis, yet generally has a strong underlying sense of justice'*

So I try to take a step back from the welter of opinions I am subject to and remember that, if I want to understand how *best* (and we can only do our best, whatever our response, it will never be perfect) to respond I need, as a person of faith, to stand in the desire of God.

LAWLESSNESS AND SCRIPTURE

Now it's clear that societies have always struggled with lawlessness. A few chapters on in Matthew's gospel he reflects on the situation his community faced in the mid-1st cent: *'because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come.'* (Matt. 24:12-14)

The maintenance of law and order was (and, of course, still is) the mark of a secure society. Whether that society was civilised is another matter – I am sure there was law and order in Nazi Germany – and the breakdown of law and order was seen as heralding the end-times. That's a theme we find both in the Old and New Testaments and is the stuff of Christian fundamentalists – and to be avoided! So I find myself reflecting on the question – apart from the law, what holds us together? What *are* the essential elements of a civilised society? Well, clearly they are multifarious. At present we might be aware of the importance of law and order but think further and one might recognise that justice, rather than vengeance, is essential. For Christians and Jews the 'Ten Commandments' might seem basic, for they cover respect for persons and property. But we might also recall that these are dependent on the lynchpin of belief in, and respect for, the ultimate authority of God.

But we also know that once you introduce Laws people will find a way to break them. So I also recall that when Jesus was asked his opinion as to what Law was most important, he observed that *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."* *This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."* *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'* (Matt. 22: 37-40)

THE HEART

Just before the gospel extract we heard this morning Jesus had reflected on the causes of some of the problems in his society and he said this: *"out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person..."* (Matt. 15: 19/20)

The crisis that erupted in our midst last week is, I believe, one that comes from the heart. That is my opinion and I am ready for it to be challenged! But what I have learnt over the years is that we are governed by what the heart is set upon, both individually *and* as a society.

Each of us is filled with a mixture of emotions, desires, feelings, passions which are the most powerful forces we experience inside of us. And under the power of these we can perform the most heroic acts or do the most violent things. So each of us needs to ask the question, *on what is my heart set?*

The acquisition of more and more 'stuff' (as Fr. David mentioned on Friday night); the desire to satisfy our base cravings; the lure of riches or celebrity: none of these will, in the end, satisfy our deepest desires for these can only be satisfied by God, the source of all good. *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."*

That's why this is the first and greatest commandment and its dependent on the belief of God as the greatest good. That which will fulfil the deepest desires of our heart. So I might ask myself – what, in my life, does that for me? What to I seek to fulfil my deepest needs? The latest

computer game, holiday in Florida or acquisition of an i-phone might satisfy us to an extent but do they satisfy our deeper hunger?

On what is the heart set? To seek the good of others; to value ourselves and delight in our inner beauty and fundamental goodness: to be open to love and be loved – these are the means whereby we will satisfy our deepest needs.

CONCLUSION

But, so often, these are not what we are told we need. Satisfying the self comes before the needs of others; beauty is to be found at a price and we are lured by the temptation to condemn the other. The enemy of the good is always present, whether we call that the devil or evil or Satan, the ancient name for that which opposes and obstructs the call to goodness. To God.

The lawlessness which erupted on the streets of our towns and cities last week *is* always present and no revision of our laws or increase in the number of police on our streets, no longer prison sentences or re-introduction of the death penalty will, in the end, prevent it erupting again. Only a change of heart for us as individuals and as a society will do that. That's called conversion and its something basic to our faith and something that needs to happen every day. On what is my heart set? To what does it incline? To the goodness of God or self-satisfaction? There is no doubt that when the heart is set on its own gratification then it can easily be led astray. But a heart inclined to God will always find itself recalled to seek fulfilment in reaching out to the Other with that same mercy, love and justice it seeks.

There is a restlessness in society. There will always be. But that restlessness, as St. Augustine reminded us, is because God has made us to live in union with Him and the restlessness in us is, in the end, wont be satisfied by 'stuff' or status, by power or achievement, but by at-one-ness with Him.

Amen