

Response to the Riots Trinity 8 2011

Isaiah 56¹⁻⁸, Ps 67, Romans 11¹⁻³⁶, Matthew 15²¹⁻²⁸

There have been three main responses to last week's rioting. They are not mutually exclusive. In fact they complement one another. The first is to say that the rioters are completely *out of order*. Innocent people should not have to put up with having their businesses and homes vandalised, their goods stolen and their lives put at risk. Neither should the public street be made a no go area for ordinary decent people. Whatever measures are necessary to stop the riots should be taken by the authorities. If rioters and looters get hurt or even killed, they've got it coming to them. We may well sympathise with the communities which got fed up with waiting for the police and defended their own homes and business premises by force where necessary.

On second thoughts, however, we won't want to go too far down that road. Would we really want the police to risk a child's life to stop him stealing a pair of trainers? It is easy to see how defending our own communities could escalate to tit for tat raids on other people's communities or meting out rough justice ourselves on the people we suspect of robbing us. Two hundred years ago we hung child criminals or transported them to Australia. We called out the troops to fire on rioters. But the streets of London were much more dangerous then than they are now. A more humane penal system, introduced in the C19 and C20, was part of a general process of civilising society, along with welfare, education and scientific advance, which made the world a far better place in 1911 than it had been in 1811. An important force for change for the better in the C19 and the first half of the C20 was the Christian religion. From whence might a post-Christian culture derive common values and the spiritual resources to put them into practice?

The second response to the riots is to blame the collapse of respect for authority and for other people. Too many youngsters, it seems, neither respect nor fear their parents, their teachers nor the police. Traditional values seem to have been lost altogether. Traditionally human communities have found social cohesion in religion and the family. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. Honour your father and your mother.* But we've marginalised religion. We've given up expecting people to make lifelong marriages and to bring up their children in stable homes. It follows, argue traditionalists, that there are no restraints. We don't respect other people. We're not afraid of the consequences of our actions. The cynic says that morality is what is left when there is no-one watching. Too many people today feel that no-one is watching – no God, no kind but firm father figure, no effective criminal justice system. Couple the feeling that nobody else cares with a lack of a feeling of self worth and indeed there is no restraint. The Christian traditionalist might well add that, having taught our young people that their value as persons depends on possessing the latest gadgets and fashionable clothes (the opposite of what Jesus taught when He said, *Take heed and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth*) we ought not to be surprised if they just help themselves to what they want when the opportunity presents itself. It is interesting that Isaiah in today's reading speaks of God's blessing on the man who keeps the Sabbath, that day of rest from labour and commerce, set aside to spend time with God and our families, which we have so carelessly sacrificed on the twin altars of materialism and commercialism.

But, again on second thoughts, we might hesitate to think we can or should re-impose traditional religious or family values. Would we exclude unbelievers and followers of non-Christian religions from public life as they were excluded until C19? Would we make divorce difficult or impossible, perhaps trapping people in loveless or abusive relationships? Would we shame unmarried mothers and force them and their babies into some modern equivalent of the workhouse? We may well want a cohesive society based on common values of mutual respect and care, but the question is always how would such a society treat those of its members who couldn't or wouldn't conform?

A slight variation on the traditionalist response that society has broken down because people have lost respect for religion, the family and authority in general, is the response of disillusioned traditionalists like me. Given the shocking scandals which, over the last twenty or so years, have rocked the royal family, governments of both major parties, parliament, the banks and the media, even the Church, given the feeling that ordinary people are being ripped off by major corporations such as the privatised utility companies, given the faint stench of corruption in local government, is it any wonder that people have lost respect for authority? As the Chief Rabbi put it, if those at the top of society behave as though the only commandment were *Thou shalt not get caught*, why should we be surprised when the masses disregard the real Ten Commandments which God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai? The answer to that lies in respecting the office even when the holder of the office in question might be hard to respect, but that takes a lot of doing.

Finally, some people have blamed the riots on the fact that the rioters have nothing. They have no stake in society, we are told. There is a serious danger of oversimplifying here. Most poor people don't riot or loot. Some of the looters seem to have been pretty well off. But it would be hypocritical if we thought that the upper and middle classes and the better off working classes – people like us – could find fulfilment in life in material possessions, a decent job, higher education perhaps, social status, maybe even celebrity – and that the people at the bottom of the heap should somehow be purer and derive their sense of self-worth from more spiritual ideals, that they shouldn't mind if the odds are stacked against their ever getting a good job, going to college or owning a nice home or car. Most of us have made it, some of you by dint of hard work and going without when you were younger. Some of you may have made it up from the bottom. If so, you're to be admired. It is much harder if your Mum was 16 when you were born, you don't know who your dad is, you live on a crime ridden estate in the catchment area of a sink secondary school and the only people who have any money seem to be the drug dealers. I had two parents, decent Christian people, who regarded education as a priority and wanted me and my sister to get on. We weren't rich but we never went without anything important. I went to grammar school and university. I'm not going to condemn those who didn't have my advantages.

We could summarise our three responses to the riots as the need for order and the dangerous consequences of social exclusion. We set ourselves two traps here. On the one hand, we can contend so hard for order and social cohesion, that we exclude those who cannot or will not conform to our blueprint for society. We condemn the unmarried mother or teenage thief to a life of shame and penury. We exclude from higher education all but the smartest. We

decline to help those whom we deem to be the undeserving poor. We deal harshly and unsympathetically with those who transgress the law, if necessary breaking them in order to protect their possible victims. On the other hand, we can be so desperate to include everybody that we give up on standards. We set exams everyone can pass. We provide benefits which keep people as comfortable as they would be if they worked for a living. We absorb the consequences of *free love* by providing out of our taxes for illegitimate and deserted children. Punishments amount to not much more than a slap on the wrist. We can't win, can we?

Our three Bible readings today are actually about inclusion and exclusion and about standards. The Christian message is that everyone is potentially included in the Christian community. *God so loved the world*. He loved the Canaanite woman in Matthew. He loved the Gentiles and the Jews about whom Paul writes to the Romans. He loves the various categories of outcast, the people who might have regarded themselves as outcast, whom Isaiah promises will be included by God in the fulfilment of His promises. God's loving arms, the arms of Jesus stretched out on the Cross, welcome everybody. *Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out*, says Jesus. He accepts us just as we are, sinners that we are. God loves us as we are and accepts us as we are. All we have to do is to put our faith in Him and to repent of our sins – our lack of love for God and for other people. Everybody who chooses to be is included in God. There is no social exclusion from God and a Church or a community which practises social exclusion is not a Christian Church or a Christian community. But what about standards? When God welcomes everybody who will come into the Kingdom of Heaven, He sets us the very highest standard. The standard He sets us is to be as loving as He is. He doesn't fill His Church by lowering standards. He sets the highest standard of all, which is love, and He fills His Church with absolutely everybody who calls on the Name of the LORD, because He is love and, once we are made members of His Church, the process begins of transforming each one of us into perfect love. God asks a great deal of us. He asks everything of us so that we may complete the work of establishing the Kingdom of God among men and women in love.

In yesterday's Old Testament lesson, the people of Israel had settled the Promised Land. Joshua was now their leader but he was about to die. He asked the Israelites whether they would serve the LORD Who had brought them out of Egypt, through the Wilderness and into Canaan, or would they serve the gods of Mesopotamia or Egypt or of the land of Canaan where they now lived. People in those days worshipped their rulers. They worshipped the gods of silver and gold. They worshipped the gods whom they believed brought them material prosperity or victory in battle. They worshipped gods whose cults included sex, alcohol and drugs. Not so very different from today then. Not surprisingly, the Israelites said they would worship the LORD, but Joshua's response is striking. He tells them that they can't serve the LORD. The LORD is a jealous God and they cannot serve the LORD and the gods of silver and gold, of worldly power, of celebrity and of military might, the gods of *get out of your face* on greed, drugs or sex. If they served the LORD they could only serve Him wholeheartedly and only wholeheartedly could they be the people of God, a kingdom of priests. That too hasn't changed. We the Church can only fulfil our vocation if we do so wholeheartedly. Paradoxically we can only save the world if we renounce it.