Sermon at St Nicholas, Islip

4th August 2024

Exodus 16: 2-4, 9-15

John 6: 24-35

“It’s been hard to make sense of events in Britain this week.” That’s how one of our mainstream newspapers began its on-line reporting yesterday.

It was hard enough to absorb the story which came out of the coastal town of Southport last Monday. A 17-year-old, dressed in a mask, gets out of a taxi and attacks a holiday club of young children, killing three and injuring many more including adults trying to protect the youngsters.

It’s one of those tragedies which will maim the families and the community where they live for the remainder of their days. Where once there was the innocence of a Taylor Swift dance class now there is grief and utter bewilderment.

As we worship here this morning we pray for those families, for the emergency workers involved, for the children damaged, and we ask ourselves – what do those families, that community, and our nation need as we all make sense of what’s happened?

I’ll return to Southport in a minute and what then flared up, but first let me talk about what we heard in our readings. In a way these readings belong to this time of year, the start of the summer holidays, summer rhythms.

You’ll know that John’s gospel has two big stories at its heart. In Chapter 6, in Galilee, Jesus feeds 5,000 hungry people with the picnic brought to the event by a young boy. In the context of all that follows we hear, in the local synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus’ claim: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Energized by seeing people fed the crowds of Galilee mobilize themselves and are at risk of creating a mob insurrection such that Jesus tries to remove himself in case they take him by force; in case violence and vested interests, agendas and resentments, take over.

In Chapter 9 a similar thing happens, this time in Jerusalem, when Jesus heals a man born blind and he regains his sight. As a prelude to that story Jesus proclaims: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” And again the ‘mob’ reacts.

Two big stories around which St John organizes his material illustrating the unique place of Jesus Christ in God’s eternal purposes. Two great sayings.

“I am the bread of life…”

“I am the light of the world…”

But they also have in common that complaining and volatile crowds are woven through these narratives. The crowds witnessing them have a complaining spirit, just like their ancestors who complained about Moses and Aaron, romanticizing their life of slavery in Egypt. “The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.”

The disciples also complained. Indeed, by the end of this Chapter 6 it says, “many of Jesus’ disciples turned back and no longer went about with him”.

And, of course, by the time he reaches Jerusalem the authorities are also complaining and plotting his downfall.

Why do I say these two stories belong to our summer season? Because those who compile our scheme of readings in Church bring us back to this section of John’s gospel virtually every August. They clearly think we ought to return to this part of Scripture, though it’s easy to miss because we’re often on holiday.

Yet this year perhaps we’ll take special note because we return to it as our nation is seeing a great outpouring of complaining following the events in Southport. Coming not from that community but from those with their own agendas. I’m not referring to the laments of the bereaved parents in which we join as we rightly lament their loss. But the disturbances, some of them violent, some of them targeted at the police, have attached themselves as an environment of complaining around those killings.

Let me ask you to reflect on three elements which were there in our readings and were also there in the responses to the tragedies of this week.

· Firstly, whatever the events there will be a human tendency to complain, to seek revenge, to manipulate. It’s not the events themselves which trigger the response but our tendency to be skeptical or to create trouble for ourselves. Whether it’s hungry people or a response to bereavement, there will always be an element in us which wishes to turn towards complaint, blame and vindictiveness.

I had lunch this week with an old friend, Bishop James Jones, one-time Bishop of Liverpool, and best known for his advocacy role on behalf of the Hillsborough families. We got to talking about the experience of public inquiries because after Hillsborough there was the infected blood inquiry, the Gosport Hospital scandal, and now the Covid and Post Office inquiries. Whilst all these had substantial issues to address there’s also the way complaining turns to vengeful anger, a place without mercy. A great outpouring of rage often from those unaffected. We must guard against our tendency to complain and blame.

· Secondly, we notice how Jesus is very wary of trusting the crowds and their direction of travel. Repeatedly he withdraws himself, he chooses to remain hidden, he doesn’t reveal his intentions when he travels to Jerusalem because he knows the capacity of a crowd to become a mob. The morals of a crowd are always less trustworthy than those of an individual.

That is just what was happening this week when far-right groups spread false rumours and went looking for asylum seekers to blame, stirring up fear and outrage.

The political life of our nation is increasingly displayed, not in mainstream parties of the right or the left but in networks of association, mobilized by actions, organized through social media, casual a lot of the time about what is factually true. Young people are joining movements not parties.

Jesus knew better than to hand over control of his plans or his message to ‘the crowd’. He would not cede power to it, and nor should we.

· And thirdly, Jesus contests with the crowd about the narrative they were promoting. The story of God providing manna for his people, their daily bread which sustained them as they wandered in search of a promised land, was known to every Jew. The crowd quoted it to Jesus as they asked from him signs and wonders. “What signs are you going to give us?” And he reminds them that the manna wasn’t given by Moses and Aaron as signs to impress but came from God’s hand as a gift to sustain them; just as he gives us our daily grace.

So here we have an encouragement from Jesus to make sure that the stories we tell stay close to God’s rule and intention.

We acknowledge the human habit of complaint and blame, we resist the worst behaviour of a crowd, and we pray that those families in Southport be protected, even as they grieve, from narratives that do no justice to them or their community.