

2nd Sunday after Trinity

'When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd'. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We've seen scenes of senseless violence again this past week whipped up by wicked influences on social media. It seems an awful pattern is emerging whereby this kind of violence is almost expected. We lose sight of the human tragedy at the heart of it all, the cries of the families most affected, pleading that their loved one's suffering is not used as a means to spread division. Two weeks ago in Southampton, following the tragic murder of Henry Nowak. Then this week in Belfast as homes were attacked – one housing a two month old baby, and cars and buses set alight following a horrendous knife attack.

In Belfast, groups of masked men burning families out of their homes. In Southampton, men with hoods up and faces covered offering Nazi salutes and hurling bricks at police officers. Hoods up, faces covered, masks on – how courageous; seeking to instil fear, incite racism and blame community ills on immigration...certainly sheep without a shepherd. The father of one of the five men jailed for violent disorder in Southampton last week seeking mitigation said of his son he was *'like a sheep following the crowd'*. Although it is hard to feel a sense of compassion for these particular crowds.

And hard though that is, we are called to recognise something else. The statements of those imprisoned in Southampton this week showed that many of them came from disaffected backgrounds and had been involved in petty crime and worse. Many were unemployed without good education. Their disaffection with life caused them to blame others and they were easy prey to public figures who tell them it is all the fault of immigrants. *'If only we could get rid'* seems the mentality. Fear, anger and confusion becomes focused on the other.

As Christians, we are always called to bear witness to the integrity and dignity of all human life, no matter how far we have strayed from the image of God that we bear. However much sin covers that image. We are called to bear that image and shed light upon it. We are called to recognise the dignity of every person regardless of creed, colour, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality and all the many ways we like to put up boundaries to define who is 'in' and who is 'out'. In the words of our psalmist, we are to *'know that the Lord is God; it is he that has made us and we are his; we are his people and the sheep of his pasture'*.

That is the calling of a very different crowd that we hear about in today's gospel. That is the calling of the crowd that is the 12 disciples. Anything but anonymous – there in black and white, exposed and, most significantly, each called by name - *'Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him'*.

For some, details of their Jewish tradition is given. For others we hear of the ancestry, their profession or their siblings. But for each their name is given. Called by their name. Each of them precious in the sight of Almighty God. Each has a vocation. Summoned to do God's work.

Even Judas Iscariot. St Matthew cannot help but add the detail that this is *'the one who betrayed him'*, as if the reader needed reminding. And yet even Judas Iscariot plays a part in the story of God's salvation for the world. Just how much more would today's society tear apart Judas' reputation. No doubt he would be 'cancelled'. But remember Christ is crucified between two thieves. As St Paul reminds us *'God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us'*.

'While we were still sinners'. Jesus did not wait until we had made a slightly better effort at sorting out the world's problems. He did not wait until we had proved ourselves that bit more worthy. He didn't wait until we had sorted ourselves out. But precisely when we were far from that image bestowed in each of us. There is a reason why, so often in churches on Good Friday, the congregation play the part of the crowd that cries *'Crucify Him, crucify Him'*.

This means that the Church is not a gathering of the already righteous. It is a community of those who know they have been met by mercy. And that should change how we see everything and everyone else about us. It should change how we see the crowds. It should change how we see crowds of people coming to this country in a small boat in search of a better life. It should change how we see the crowd of people perpetrating violence on our streets. We should not see them with the eyes of the world.

Because perhaps the most uncomfortable thing of all this is that the line between the crowd and the disciples is not as clear as we might think. The same fear, anger, confusion and capacity for sin that we see played out on the streets of our cities lives within our hearts. We too can very easily become like sheep without a shepherd. We too can be swept along by the crowd - by fear, outrage, by desire to belong, even at the expense of others and history is littered with examples. (*'we have erred & strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts'* BCP confession)...

Like the twelve disciples, each of us is call by name. Called out from anonymity. Called out of the crowd. Called into a life that reflects something different. A life shaped not by fear but love. Not by division but reconciliation. Not by violence but peace. Not an easy calling. Sometimes it works against everything that feels instinctive; revenge, bitterness, jealousies but Christ is the pattern of our calling that we seek to live out each day. *'Thou and thou only, first in my heart'* as we shall sing before we too our sent from this place to live in this Way. Lord help us to bear your image in us and to see your likeness in all your children. Amen.