

Does it really matter to you who Jesus is?

I mean really?

I know you'll mostly say yes –after all you are sitting here in Church- most of you have come regularly over many years and many of you would have some wonderful stories to tell of God in their lives.

We'll stand up soon and say the creed -we will share the bread and the wine together. As a Christian family we have built up our identity round Christ.

So actually how dare I ask if it matters to you who Jesus is?

Well - just lets look at our Gospel reading.

Jesus asked his friends -his disciples -‘what’s the word on the street about me?’

The answers were interesting.....John the Baptist -who had been a major -though weird celebrity had just been killed -some folk thought Jesus was somehow John back from the dead. Others - this was the Jews remember -thought of their important prophets -Elijah maybe -or Jeremiah.

They all understood that Jesus was not ordinary -that he was some sort of a truth bearer, but they didn't exactly get it.

It was Peter who nailed it -‘You are the Christ. The Son of the living God.’

Who knows how much he understood -from the way he behaved later you could guess that he didn't get the full picture -but he saw -by instinct I suspect -that this was more than a prophet, more than a wise and special holy man. More than a miracle worker.

Peter saw, sensed God in the man before him.

OK -hold that.

It's been a very strange experience this holiday, because, unlike other years I've kept in touch. I get the Times on my Ipad and I kept an eye on Twitter and Facebook. Therefore I experienced the riots -but from a distance -and with the perspective of the French press and all sorts of other interesting comment from around the world.

It was clearly horrible. There was fear and distress, there was huge loss –specially small businesses –and there was that look in the eyes of some who were enjoying the whole experience -which I guess was the most chilling part of all.

It has to be said that in the press in other countries there was more than a touch of schaden freude. There are some who feel that we rather shoot our mouths off about the weaknesses of others and set ourselves up as in some way superior. The way Gordon Brown for example went on about his handling of the British economy being so superior to the euro zone.

The Russian Press had a hilarious piece about the fact that the protestors had let all the animals out of London Zoo and Lions and Tigers could be heard roaring in London Streets

The press in Iraq called for the United Nations to step in and protect the freedom fighting protestors from the oppressive police.

Then there was the truly wonderful response of people going out into the streets the very next day to help with the clearing up. I would most certainly have gone myself if I'd been around.

What really stuck me though -what is still giving me such a lot of food for thought -was the nature of the response -both private and in the press.

Worse than that -in the Christian media flow.

What do I mean?

Well- it simply felt that we were responding to violence with violence. The extraordinarily simplistic division -me good-you bad, the immoderate use of the word 'evil' -the knee jerk shouts for anyone involved to be locked up –and throw away the key.

Giles Fraser (in the Church Times) was –as usual- on the money as he explored how we as Christians react to violence. He was referring to the philosopher René Girard -who warns that violence is dangerously mimetic – how our response can actually become engagement with violence rather than the mature and faithful response of compassion and non-violence.

Now this is absolutely crucial. If we really believe that Jesus is the son of God -that he is God incarnate -living with us -expressing the God-way of being human -then when we look at his response to violence we will understand the heart of God on this matter.

Jesus way was always compassion -he never had violent words to say to those who had fallen -all he was interested in was compassion and restoration.

As he was tortured and executed -he didn't judge and blame -he forgave.

So – when we examine how we feel about the events of the past weeks -the basic gospel question is about how we love the people who have done these wrongs.

Its always the hardest Christian question. Its not that hard to love one another here in church -mostly we are fairly blandly good to one another -but loving people who are hard to love -well that's the rub. But don't you see -that's what took Jesus to the cross. He did not continue the human route of violence begetting violence - he turned that on its head.

What merit is there in putting a young woman in prison for six months because she got caught up in a moment of extraordinary bad crowd behaviour? She has punished herself -her career path is ruined; her family are crushed and disappointed. In prison she will experience more violence, she will have her sense of self-worth smashed, she will be turned from a person with hope and dreams into someone who has been brutalised and who becomes more not less likely to commit further crimes.

These days call for the deepest resources of compassion and love. Justice of course -but how about restorative justice -which helps the community and raises the person's capacity for understanding the effects of their actions.

Now this is a baptism service -and in a moment parents and God-parents will be making promises about the way they live their lives in order to show Callie a good way to live.

We understand that it's not just what parents say to their children, but how they actually live that forms their child's worldview and sets a template for their own inner moral compass.

At a national level this is where people of faith should be. It is how we live not how we pontificate that has the potential for being a source of good and hope for our country.

The other important thing about understanding that Jesus is indeed the Son of God -is that he, and he alone is the one without sin.

When such dreadful events happen on our streets it is easy to think that they were perpetrated by a group of people who are particularly rotten.

Well -maybe just have to courage to work out they ways in which you are also involved. The society that these young people are growing up in is the society that we have created. The values that they do or do not have are the ones we passed down to them. The free money we got through completely unrealistic rises in house prices turns out not to be free at all, but stolen from the next generation. 'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.'

Oh-er....this is sounding fierce. But I guess the first steps towards healing and reconciliation needs to be a proper understanding that we are all in this together.

As Christians we do have a wonderful message, a message that is about healing and restoration. A message that can and should bring real hope to our society -but it is not a message of judgment and self-righteousness -it is a message of love and forgiveness, a message of compassion and healing. A message from a people who go on loving when the going gets really tough.

I can't imagine that what I'm saying this morning will be popular - but interestingly the tide is turning – immoderate and harsh sentences are being overturned -society is working out that if you treat people like animals they will behave like animals. If we resolve to treat everyone -that's everyone, as precious and loved children of God -offering them hope rather than condemnation - then maybe we can be the agents of God's love that each one of us is called to be.

Amen.