

## Trinity 4 Proper 10

My grandfather read the News of the World avidly. The News of the World was a newspaper which thrived in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as adult literacy increased, and as uprightness formed by chapels and churches spread. My grandfather, proudly working class, and a profoundly honest soul, loved his Sunday morning read before worshipping at the Methodist church down the road. The newspaper proclaimed words of judgement on naughty vicars and corrupt politicians, and my grandfather, who had volunteered for World War 1 and been impoverished in the 1930s believed that speaking truth to power was something to be supported. From 1969 under Rupert Murdoch's ownership, the paper gave high editorial priority to salacious gossip and titillation. It offered a view of the world very close to the one named in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as Vanity Fair by John Bunyan and where on sale are:

*all such merchandise as houses, lands, trades, places, honours, preferment, titles, counties, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures. And delights of all sorts, as whores, bawds, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, bold, bodies, souls, silver, gold...here are to be seen too thefts, murders, adulteries, false swearers, and that of a blood red colour...'*

I confess to judging my grandfather harshly for his choice of newspaper, which he read to the end of his life. And I thought of him when, appointed to Leicester, I was warned by the Church Communications Office that News Corp journalists would go through my rubbish bins.

This is the first Sunday for over a century with no news of the world. And it has been a week of judgements.

First, the judgement by parliament and the people of News Corps, after the revelations of extensive phone tapping not just of celebrities, but of anyone who had come into the public eye through tragedy. So to the resignation of Rebekah Brooks and Les Hinton, and the Parliamentary Select Committee and Judicial enquiry still to come.

Second, the judgement by the people of parliament, as revelations of the extensive social links between Prime Ministers and News Corp executives. The Labour leader Ed Miliband has triumphantly proclaimed that the politicians have "held power to account" Hang on a minute. It is the politicians who are supposed to be the 'power' that the press hold to account. The politicians had the power and gave it away out of fear. Or that, at least, is what it looks like.

Third, the judgement by parliament of the police. Officers charged with the protection of the monarch have sold reporters secret information about the royal family, potentially jeopardising the safety of the Queen. Something which as Paul Vallely pointed out in the Church Times this week, in a previous age, would have been called treason.

Fourthly, the judgement of the people. After all, we are the ones who have colluded in the process which has displaced power from parliament to the press, and within press to News Corp. We have bought the papers. Or if not, still consumed the gossip second hand.

Fifthly, the judgement of the church. The Church of England Ethical Investment Advisory group does an excellent job in holding the Church Commissioners to Account, for its investments, most significantly engaging this year with BP over its environmental record, and Vedanta Mining over potential tribal displacements around its Orissa mine. Last weekend at General Synod the group proposed that the Commissioners should disinvest in News Corp. There were two responses to this proposal. Firstly some shock that the Commissioners **have** an investment in News Corp, and then, from Andreas Whittam Smith who runs the Commissioners, the response that disinvesting at the moment would be 'ticklish' as the shares have fallen in value, so it is a bad time to sell without affecting grants to places like Leicester Cathedral which is dependent on Commissioners income.

Which illustrates the complexity and messiness of it all. So back to today's gospel, which has judgement as its endpoint, but messiness and complexity at its heart. Perhaps more than any other gospel Matthew deals with practical, human problems, the kind of problems confronted by everyday by Christians and communities. Today's gospel is about the experience we have of the mixing of the good and the not so good. It follows the parable of the sower and the seed, which preceded it, but now a new character enters the picture: an enemy who, alongside the good seed sows weeds. The parable does not debate the role of the enemy, of contest his presence, but focuses on two responses to the effect of his work. First the workers become alarmed at the sight of weeds sprouting amongst the wheat and become edgy. They are perplexed as to where the weeds came from. They even harbour doubts about the householder: did he really sow good seed at all? When they are told the enemy sowed the seeds they want to take matters into their own hands and pull up the weeds to maintain a pure crop.

But then there is the householder who doesn't seem surprised or agitated about the weeds, but urges the workers to be patient. It is not that the householder is indifferent to the weeds or doesn't care. Rather, he knows what to do with weeds: turn them over the reapers at the harvest time, who can properly separate them from the wheat. Any premature weeding is bound to damage the wheat as well.

It is a parable which for the most part expounds the reality and wisdom of judgement deferred. But it doesn't end there.

It culminates in the passage from Matthew which gives western Christianity its strongest image of what we call the 'end times'. The Son of Man will send his angels and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evil doers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of the father.

The image draws on the book of Daniel where Nebuchadnezzar the ruler of Babylon misuses his powers and demands worship. Daniel and his three companions remain

faithful to God. Thrown into the fire they are rescued by God and the tyrant's purposes thwarted. But in Matthew's account of the judgement the roles are reversed. There is no deliverance for those who have inhibited God's purposes, especially those who are mighty and powerful. The cosmic battle between good and evil is at the climax, not inappropriately for the week in which Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, which draws constantly on that theme premiered.

There is a cost to judgement deferred. Without it the righteous can't 'shine like the sun' as Matthew puts it.

So we are caught in the tension of waiting patiently for God's judgement at the end, and longing for God's kingdom to begin now. Paul ponders this tension in the Letter to the Romans: *'the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.... We groan inwardly while we wait for adoption.* He also points to glimpses of God's work:

*Brothers and sisters, we are debtors not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh....For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption.*

One commentator this week likened the behaviour of members of parliament to peasants released from bondage sacking the castle of their feudal lord. And both Matthew and Paul would see moments of judgement as moments of possibility and so, in the profoundest sense, good news.

There is the possibility of good news in its profoundest sense for Rupert and James Murdoch, if they will allow themselves to be liberated from the pursuit of power and profit alone.

Good news too for members of parliament, if they allow themselves to be freed from the fear of a bad press.

And good news for the people of this country, if we can be freed from the fear the abuse of our privacy. Good news too if we can be freed from our addiction to prurient interest in the private lives of others.

There is a profound risk when judgement is exercised, for it is God's role to judge, and acting as God's agents carries awesome responsibility.

But a tipping point has been reached in recent days. It is, after all, harvest time. The days ahead will not be easy for any of us, if we are honest, as not just individuals, but our society is judged. But with the risk of judging and being judged comes the potential that our culture can indeed at last be set free from the bondage to decay and that we might at last obtain something more of the freedom of the glory of the children of God