

There are many words and images that might be used to describe and reflect on the shocking scenes that have emerged from the streets of our Capital and other cities in recent days. As someone who in the early years of my Christian ministry, gave my heart and soul to the town of Croydon, I found the sight of familiar landmarks and locations blazing and being ransacked, particularly distressing.

As the inevitable avalanche of opinion, argument and counter-argument ensues, the Biblical text that I cannot dispel from my mind is the parable of Jesus, recorded in Luke 6:41-42.



*“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in someone else’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say, ‘Friend, let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from the other person’s eye.”*

This may seem a somewhat unusual and even inappropriate text on which to focus, yet I would suggest that it has a powerful relevance in the present circumstances. The one question that seems to dominate so much of the media response is that inevitable question “Who is to blame?” Extremists on either side have rushed to either utterly condemn the rioters or exonerate their actions in the light of various socio-economic factors which are considered to justify them. Yet the common refrain from almost every quarter is that the fault lies with someone but themselves.

Yet I have to say that I am personally dismayed every time a journalist or TV interviewer rushes to this all-too-easy option as the basis for the debate. As long as we seek to find the fault in others, then there is little hope for any meaningful response or solution – the question for every citizen, every parent, every young person, every community activist and politician is not how are others at fault, but how am I at fault? Yet it repeatedly seems to be the question that is never asked.

Of course this is the very dynamic which the rioters themselves have latched on to. Some of them do face significant disadvantage, and do feel betrayed, ignored and marginalised by the society against which they have lashed out so destructively. Yet as they have struggled with these issues, they too have done so against a rhetorical backdrop which seeks to lay the blame for every ill at someone else’s feet. Sadly the context of almost every political debate is one party or other using almost any issue to expose the faults and shortcomings of their opponents, while extolling themselves as being the only authentic solution. Either way, the underlying message is that responsibility for addressing the ills of society lies not with those who perpetrate them, but those who as politicians, community activists, organisations and yes, even faith groups, aspire to be recognised (and of course funded) as holding the solution.

And so it is that we find ourselves confronted by familiar knee-jerk inquiries – are the police to blame for losing control of our streets; the courts for not handing out sufficiently robust sentences; the government for making cuts; parents for not adequately supervising their children; schools for not instilling sufficient discipline; bankers for creating economic ruin; policy



makers for an inappropriate emphasis on human rights and compensation culture? There is at least a grain of truth in every one of these propositions, so there are indeed plenty of sawdust specks to be observed in the eyes of others.

TV stations are quick to present themselves as objective arbiters, yet in doing so can often avoid any scrutiny of the social impact of the programmes which they constantly stream that celebrate and reward exhibitionism, excessive and self-indulgent behaviour and mob dynamics. Those who are the victims of the looters, are also

those who through media advertising seek to promote material desire and attach status to the ownership of their products. That is not to condone the appalling actions of those who have taken to the streets, they too have to face up to the responsibility for what they have done – but for too long we have lived with a culture that wants to attach blame to others but seldom if ever encourages us to ask “How have I contributed to this problem?”

As a parent of teenagers I have to ask myself this question in relation to the love and discipline that I offer to my children; as a School Governor, I have to ask how we might have better shaped the values of the young people in our care; and of course those of us who, as the people of Christ, are called to be the Salt and Light of our communities have to ask how we have failed to engage and inspire each generation with the message of hope, contentment and love for our neighbour to which we attach so much significance.

The human dynamic which Jesus captures in this story is the simple reality that we are often far better at seeing the faults in others than those within ourselves. So of course when confronted with the question “who is to blame?” we will not find it difficult to come up with answers. And as long as we assume that we can lay the entire blame in one place, it will always reside nowhere, for there will always be that shred of culpability to be found somewhere else. We should not then be surprised if the only outcome is that perpetual round of hand-wringing and heated argument which achieves very little other than sustaining the output of our news channels until a bigger story comes along to occupy our attention. If the faults in others are easier to see than those which reside within ourselves, then there is much more to be gained if we engage in any ensuing debate, with an instinct to listen and be open to the perspectives of our critics.

I believe that the most positive question that people of faith can ask right now is “how are we at fault?” I am particularly concerned about the growing emergence of a brand of Christianity which is no less materialistic than the society which we lament; the symbols of God’s blessing are wealth and possession, and the rewards of faithfulness are personal status and significance. Perhaps we should not be too surprised if even young people with a faith background in their early years, become impatient and decide to take to the streets and do this God’s work for him. How many of our youth programmes seek to do little more than entertain our teenagers, fuel their ambition for the unrealistic, leaving very little room for the messages of shalom, contentment, self-denial and patient endurance which are such central themes in our Scriptures?

But our reflections need to extend beyond the activities of our church programmes. Within our congregations will be retailers, police officers, civil servants, community activists, advertisers, teachers, journalists and many more – each of us might usefully consider the roles we play, the workplace values and methodologies that we take for granted, and ask ourselves two crucial questions – “how might I be to blame?” and “what can we do to make things different?” That is not to be insensitive to the pain and loss which many in our pews will have suffered through their lives and roles in the community, yet the yearning of even the most hurting heart will also be – how can we build a world in which this will not happen again?

There are no doubt many specks to be picked from the eyes of individuals and organisations, yet the point of this story is that if we are to see the planks of moral change rather than the token removal of a few communal irritants, then this is a time for widespread self-examination rather than seeking to point the finger of blame at others.

And yes, there is without question a need for every person who took to the streets to take a long hard look at themselves and the actions in which they have engaged. But if this is to happen, and to become an instinctive feature of future generations, then they need to sense that they are part of a society which does not at almost every level seeks to apportion the blame for everything to everyone else.

There are important questions to be asked in the wake of what has happened, but it is vital that these are not couched in language which in itself takes for granted some of the values and perspectives that also warrant careful re-examination. Faith communities have a crucial role to play in that process, and in doing so, what impact might we make if we deliberately model an attitude of listening and self-examination in the midst of a world where apportioning blame comes so much more naturally. Even as I compile these thoughts, I have to consider what inner hypocrisies, hidden to myself, I might be revealing – I can only pray that I will have to the grace to listen to those who have the grace to point them out to me. God help me to recognise and play whatever part I can in making our society different.



**Revd Phil Jump - Regional Minister, North Western Baptist Association, Vice chair - Industrial Christian Fellowship**

All seeing and all knowing God,  
Who alone can understand and fathom the events that our streets have witnessed in recent days,  
Reassure us with the truth that no action of humanity  
Can extend Your love for Your creation beyond its bounds.  
Help us to receive and experience that love afresh  
And may it be the foundation of any response that we seek to make.

Help us to never confuse the inexcusable with the unforgivable  
To apportion blame before we have asked searching questions of ourselves.  
May we be ready to confront injustice and wrongdoing in its every form;  
And may we seek to build a world  
Where the rewards of human endeavour  
Are not expressed in terms of wealth, power and personal gain  
But the Sabbath contentment and well-being of all  
That was the consummation of Your act of creation.

Give wisdom to those to whom we will look for answers and actions;  
By your Spirit, challenge the hearts of those who have done wrong;  
Grant vision and courage to those who have the capacity to make things different  
And bless the endeavours of those who are already engaged in being Good News on our streets.  
Help your church, in her every expression  
To play her part in bringing to earth the values of heaven,  
To re-inspire those who feel they have no voice or responsibility in our world,  
To re-engage those who have lost all desire for common good.

Bring healing and restoration to our hurting communities  
Hope and purpose to those who have lost it  
And lead us all we pray, to a deeper understanding  
Of what it means to be made in Your image  
AMEN



A further prayer, written by Revd. DR. Pat Took, President of the Baptist Union, can be found at <http://www.baptist.org.uk/latest-news/768-bugb-president-calls-for-prayers-for-london-and-our-cities.html>

Other prayers and reflections can be found at <http://www.icf-online.org/icfprayers.php>

