

Last Sunday, in the wake of the dreadful attacks in Paris the previous Friday, we struggled to come to terms with what had happened; we thought of men and women caught up in the violence of those who purported to act in the name of faith. We thought of words of President Michael Higgins in his poem ‘The Prophets are weeping’ in which he wrote:

*The Prophets are weeping,  
At the abuse  
Of their words,  
Scattered to sow an evil seed.  
Rumour has it that,  
The Prophets are weeping,  
At their texts distorted,  
The death and destruction,  
Imposed in their name.*

He had earlier spoken of the: “incredible threats from those who abuse sacred texts”

Another week has gone by. There was further death and destruction in the Paris suburb of St Denis and yesterday Brussels went into lockdown in the face of a serious terrorist threat from those who masterminded the carnage in Paris. Forces on the right, with their own agendas, have sought to use these events to further their own aims of division, of marginalisation of refugees who have fled the horror of the situation that is the Middle East at this time.

What have our own sacred texts, those texts that we read Sunday by Sunday in our worship, texts that have shaped our own society, our own values; what have these to say in the face of this continued turmoil? These texts were written in a particular time and place, in particular circumstances – all very different to our own.

Christians down through the ages have seen these scriptures as addressed to them, in their circumstances, speaking into the situations that they face.. This does not mean that they provide cut and dried answers. What it does mean is that as we read, as we hear it read, God speaks to us through these texts.

This means we are not just to hear – we are to listen. That is deeper than just hearing the spoken words. How often have we heard someone saying to us ‘You’re not listening to me!’? You’re not paying attention..

The lessons we have heard from the Book Daniel and John’s Gospel both speak of Kingship. We have two very different pictures. The first is of the heavenly courts, of authority bestowed on :

one like a human being  
coming with the clouds of heaven.  
And he came to the Ancient One  
and was presented before him.  
<sup>14</sup>To him was given dominion  
and glory and kingship,  
that all peoples, nations, and languages  
should serve him.

The other, in John’s Gospel, seems a parody of Kingship. A battered and bruised Jesus brought before the representative of the might of the Roman Empire who asks of him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ You can sense the disdain in Pilate’s voice – you are irrelevant.

What does that battered and bruised Jesus have to say to us in the present situation of international terrorism? So let us not just hear, let us listen to this passage, let us engage with this passage.

Let us begin by imagining ourselves as part of that scene. How do we see the battered and bruised figure of Jesus on that morning in Jerusalem? Do we see him as the High Priests and religious leaders saw him – a disruptive influence, a trouble maker, a dangerous influence who needs to be silenced. Or do we see him through the eyes of Pilate, an irrelevance who has got himself into an awful lot of trouble – but not worth worrying about. We continue to listen to the exchange between Jesus and Pilate. Towards the end of our Lesson we read:

<sup>37</sup>Pilate asked him, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to

testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.'

And if you recall, Pilate replies: 'And what is truth?'

'And what is truth?' As I hear, as I listen, as I engage – these are the words that speak to me across barriers of time and circumstance and culture – this has been, if you like, God's word to me this week.

How do we respond as individuals or as a community in the face of recent events and the continuing threat. As I said last week, it would be tempting to say that Europe should close its borders, that we should take no more refugees. But do we just abandon them to their fate? Surely that would be to allow the brutality and inhumanity of others to diminish our own Christian understanding of humanity and justice – in a very real sense, if we do that then the extremists have won. Or do listen, do we engage with him who is the 'Way, the Truth and the Life?' Of course we cannot ignore serious issues of security, of public safety. But as we protect our way of life and our values we must ensure that we maintain those very values of justice, of tolerance, of freedom and reconciliation that we hold dear.

Our President has spoken of "incredible threats from those who abuse sacred texts" Let us for our part listen and lay hold of the lessons of our sacred texts as we continue to pray for the city of Paris, for the people of France; for those who have been scarred in body, mind and soul, for those who mourn, for those who are tempted to turn to hate and thoughts of revenge against innocent people. We pray for leaders of governments as they seek to resolve the long standing issues that have divided the Middle East, that have fuelled the emergence of extremist groups such as ISIS. We pray for those responsible for security, for protection of our citizens. We pray that God may stand alongside those who, across divisions of culture, of race, of creed, work for peace, for reconciliation, for justice in our world – that truth, sacred truth may prevail.