

I pray that I may speak in the name of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'm sure that many of you, like me, were shocked by the recent riots and gang looting in London and other major cities. It seems that a wide range of people were involved – amongst them were a teaching assistant, graduates in social work and law, a ballerina, a sportswoman, youth leader, a chef, unemployed youth and school children. There appears to be little that this group of people had in common. The majority of them were young - under the age of 18. So who are they and what sort of communities do they come from? The answers are varied, I'm sure.

Let me be clear from the start, I don't believe there any excuses or justifications for what has happened. But we need to listen to those who don't find or value their place in our communities.

Joseph is a 20 year old, and this is his account of the mob looting in London. It was published in The Times on 9 August.

*A few years ago it would have been the other way around. Instead of coming home from work, I would have been looting the shops with the rest of them. I was capable of smashing all the windows; I could have petrol-bombed them, looted whatever was in there and enjoyed the mayhem. It would have felt like an opportunity to get one over the authorities.*

*To you I would have been a typical job but what you don't know about me is that I was fed up of living. All my life my Dad was an alcoholic. He died of an alcohol overdose. My mother committed suicide by jumping off the flats where we lived. I found her dying on the concrete.*

*I'd heard from other kids on the street about Kids Company, so I made my way there to find lots of frightening teenagers, just like myself, hanging around the doors. It's taken a long time for me to recover but I was sure Kids Company wouldn't give up, even if I felt like it at times. Their passion for my*

*wellbeing kept me going. In September I'm starting university and at the moment I'm working at an architectural firm.*

*But I want you to know that seeing the riots made me feel like I wanted to join in. I wanted to take revenge on the authorities for letting my Mum die and not getting the right kind of help for her. But shall I tell you why I didn't? Because, for the first time in my life, I had things that I really valued. It wasn't fear of the police or going to prison that stopped me from behaving badly, it was hope that I could be a respected member of society.*

I was shocked when I read this and still am. It seems so far removed from the life I enjoy here. Thank God for Kids Company and other youth organisations which provide community and a sense of self worth and hope.

The riots are happening at a time when there's widespread disquiet about cuts in government education, community and health budgets. Many are suspicious that these have been made for opportunistic or money-saving reasons. In his Leader written for the New Statesman of 13 June 2011, Archbishop Rowan articulated the public cynicism surrounding the government's idea for a 'big society'. Anger and anxiety have been generated by failing to listen to public concerns. This is especially true in urban areas where community has broken down. And in times of recession, when times are hard, it's not difficult to see how there has been a gradual loss of trust and co-operation.

In the same article, Archbishop Rowan suggests the church can offer useful theological perspectives. Not about a paternalistic valuing of the 'poor' as objects of kindness, but about the nature of organic and sustainable community. 'One in which what circulates, like the flow of blood, is the mutual creation of capacity, building the ability of the other person or group to become, in turn, a giver of life and responsibility to others.'

This is the sort of community which the apostle Paul teaches about in his letter to the Romans, and which he likens to a 'body'. No member of the body is

more important than any other. All have different gifts and depend on the others in order for the body to function fully. Paul elaborates further on this in his letter to the Corinthians – ‘the eye cannot say to the hand, I don’t need you, nor again the head to the feet.’ Weaker and stronger members of the body are equally important for its functioning. And so, in order not to be overlooked or marginalised, the weaker members need to be given special respect and honour. There must be a special care between the members. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it’.

So precisely what can the church offer? The search is not just for a common set of values, which would be difficult to find in our pluralistic society, but for a deeper common spirit –a sense of kindness, peace, patience and gentleness towards one another. These are the classic Christian fruits or gifts of the Spirit. During our church services we pray for ‘the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, with the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God’ to be with us. Paul emphasis the Spirit’s work in drawing what would otherwise be divided into varied unity and harmony. As Rowan has said recently, ‘It is the work of the Spirit that heals the Body of Christ, not the plans or the statements of any group, or any person, or any instrument of communion’ (or for that matter, any benefice re-organisation)!

This got me thinking about our churches and how we approach the challenge of change in becoming members of a new body - a united benefice. I think Ravi’s picture of a spider is helpful in understanding how we can work together – accepting some don’t find spiders to be the most endearing of God’s creatures! The 8 legs are of equal importance and represent the 8 churches, held together by the Holy Spirit in one body, with Jesus Christ as the head. As we all know, spiders are not static creatures and take great delight in scurrying around the house avoiding feather dusters. They are forever weaving intricate webs and moving on to inhabit yet more forgotten corners. And so with the church, I believe the Holy Spirit is moving us on

through our worship and fellowship, to new encounters, enabling us to make new responses in an ever changing world.

Let us pray

Father, we pray for your blessing of peace on our communities this day and especially on young people, who are our future. We pray for our benefice, that we may be continually and unconditionally open to the experience of the Spirit who makes our churches truly living. Remind us that we are called not to be conformed to the world and how things are now, but to be transformed. Help us to step out as members of one body, in openness and trust, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Linda Cross 21 August 2011