

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Cities around the world are dangerous places to live. Violence is commonplace these days. Perhaps it always was, but now there is more media reporting, there is social media and mobile phones with video capability. We all see clearly that people are volatile creatures. The ease with which men attack women, even in public, is frightening. Is the cost of the long, slow rise to equality of women in society and the workplace that they are now subject to brazen violence? And fights among teenagers are so violent that weapons and hospitalisation is not unusual. What lies so close to the surface in human beings that it can erupt into open hostility with the slightest encouragement? When in the last days of his presidency Donald Trump incited his right wing supporters, and no doubt some agitators in their midst, to march on Capitol Hill, the response was overwhelming. March the people did, march, break into the esteemed sanctum, riot and cause damage and destruction.

People are rightly outraged and frightened when these things happen. The foundations of our personal and public security are fragile and can easily break. In other times and places people went to war. War seemed to provide an outlet where primitive urges to fight and assume control over others could be undertaken. The Old Testament is full of stories of war and killings. It was certainly another time, but nonetheless there is a lust for blood and violence that has tainted humanity since Cain killed Abel. King after king waged war against each other in the history of Israel. In the centuries of the Roman Republic and Empire generals marched against other groups of people, smaller than themselves, took over and forced people to be like them. In the arena contestants fought each other to the death for glory. Human history has been laced with these things, from smaller intertribal feuds to the wars that shook the whole world.

In fact when there is no war or common conflict people make them up. Just have a look at sporting contests. They can become the cause of something quite other than the intention of a mere game. Crowd violence at soccer games, especially international games, has at times caused the sport to cease,

for games to be played without crowds. Civil unrest and hatred between groups finds a forum in a game where the most frustrating part ought really to be just how few goals are kicked in a game.

Human beings really can be reduced to the lowest common denominator. They have the potential to be so great on the one hand and do things which benefit humanity in the cosmos, glorify the image of God into which we are all made, and yet on the other hand they have equally the same potential to degrade the divine image and cause terrible destruction of self, others, and all created things.

It doesn't seem to matter that the lessons of salvation history teach us that God is so much greater and that we are indebted to God's mercy, grace and compassion, and are liable to God's judgement at the appointed time. Human beings just don't seem to get it. They constantly miss the mark. As the prophet Isaiah says, God brings to naught the lords and rulers of the earth. All human ways are temporary, as quickly gone as they have come.

But time can be awfully long when one is in the middle of it, feeling the onslaught of human beings who have succumbed to ways that are not God's ways, who have sought their own power, believing that they are greater than others and have the right to bring them down. Hell is indeed on earth – no need to look deeper than the surface of human habitation to feel the fiery pain of humanity gone wrong. The consequences of free will are indeed immense.

God does not leave us alone, however. The promise of power to the weak and strength to the powerless, the constant message of love and redemption echoing through the prophet Isaiah's words finds fulfillment in Christ incarnate. Christ became one of us, fully human, in order to effect salvation from the fall from grace that afflicts each of us.

Paul the apostle tries to convey this message to the new Christians in Corinth. He speaks about himself becoming like whoever it was to whom he spoke to gospel: to the weak he became weak, to those outside of the law he became like one outside of the law, a gentile. 'I have become all things to all people,'

he says, indicating the lengths he was prepared to go so that even a few might hear and understand and know their salvation in Christ.

In Jesus God indeed became like us, proving faithful to the promises made to the people of Israel, coming alongside us in our human frailty, and showing a better way. He became like one who was weak, and in apparent weakness revealed the paradoxical strength of God that renders all human power empty.

When human beings go astray from the ways of God and become violent, when they look inward into little worlds of power and abuse, estranged from love and compassion, when they take up arms to hurt each other, vie with each other for the transient glory of being at the top of the inner worlds they have made for themselves, when they hang the Lord on a cross to die, then rather than retribution, there is forgiveness. Because God is so much greater than human made things.

By love and forgiveness human made empires founded on greed and selfish desires are brought to naught, as the prophet Isaiah has said. God came in Jesus and offered that forgiveness in human form, in a shape that all recognised, even if they could not understand. They came to him for healing, thinking him a miracle worker, a means of release from their mortal ailments. By a mere touch or a word, he made people well, and they came to him in hordes, exhausting his human body and driving him into the quiet predawn places to pray to God for strength and renewal.

To all states of humanity the Christ comes to show love and compassion, to come alongside of pain and suffering, and to bring freedom from distress. Despite his outwardly weak form, Jesus spoke strongly to those who oppressed others who misused power. They took him to the cross for it, because they were afraid of him, afraid of how such power could be present in such an unexpected way.

To those who attempt to change, to look again to the ways of God, to get out of destructive cycles, he offers the unconditional forgiveness of God and the assurance that there can be a new start. That is surely a message of hope for

those who are caught up violence, abuse and self-seeking power. What we can do is pray for change, and for the peace of God which passes all understanding. We can be bold like Paul in speaking the gospel, becoming like others, trying to understand what it is like to be in their circumstances, so that perhaps some might hear the message and be called to a new way of life. We can always remember that God is greater than everything that is made, and in God we have forgiveness and the redemption from sin and the promise of new life.