

Trinity 8 Tackling poverty and overcoming separateness

On holiday I was reading a JM Coetzee book 'Age of Iron'. It was written in 1990 and refers to the deeply troubled times before the ending of apartheid in South Africa. The story is told from the perspective of an elderly white professor of classics who lives alone in Cape Town. She is living with a degenerative illness and is writing an imaginary letter to her daughter in the USA who left the country in disgust some years ago, vowing never to come back unless the regime should change. The contention of the book is that almost all players in the drama of the nation have become hard, brittle and desensitised. Human discourse has been all but eradicated and all that is left is a bitter battle for ascendancy and selfhood and for life itself. This is the Age of Iron, devoid of emotion and oblivious to human sensibilities. In her old age, for the first time in her life, the professor comes face to face with some of the horrors and brutality of life under apartheid for the black majority, through a series of appalling and tragic events that unfold in the family of her house-servant Florence – the hounding of Florence's son by police, the burning of a township and the murder by security forces of a teenage activist who seeks refuge in the professor's house.

It's in this setting that the professor reflects on the meaning of her life as a white South African who has lived all her life in expectation of the comforts of a privileged and protected life. She contrasts this with the sharp and bitter experiences of Florence and her family who live with no protection from the circumstances that surround them, and must live daily under the tyranny of terror, trauma and tragedy. Out of this the professor asks whether her life has in fact been any life at all, or just a half life or a shadow existence, so consistently exempt from any real trouble, as to be almost meaningless. Here, of course, Coetzee is exploring a very particular version of the shame and despair associated with white privilege in that context. Within this narrative, however, he refers I think to a universal theme about poverty and oppression versus privilege and

comfort that poses timeless and searching questions about the disparities and utter differences of experience and horizon that can exist between communities of people living side by side and cheek by jowl. Through unsparingly exposing the harshness of inequality in the South Africa of that time, he challenges us, I think, to sit up and think very hard about the inequalities we have become so accustomed to in our own country and locality that we may even have forgotten that they exist.... which brings us to the prophet Amos.

Amos is from shepherding stock and is a dresser of sycamore trees. Through divine calling, it becomes his task to express a very strong message from God to the seat of power in the northern kingdom of Israel, the court of king Jeroboam. A quick read of the book of Amos tells us that the ills of society that are cited are both civil and social. Civic processes are being ignored or manipulated, such as access to justice, and social norms or courtesies are being transgressed. In addition religious practices have become hollow. The ones who are suffering from this are the poorest.... In our passage from chapter eight this is explicit; “hear this you who trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land”. Cynically, the wheat merchants can’t wait to “make the ephah small and the shekel great” – to charge high prices for small measures, and so to “practise deceit with false balances”. Amos tells us, however, that the poverty of the poor is not a simple matter of high prices being unaffordable, but is more the result of a system of processes designed to grind people down. For the next wickedness is the selling of the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. These verses echo verses in chapter 2 verse 6 where it reads almost identically, that “they sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals”. The architects of this injustice also want to get rid of the poor altogether, “they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way”.... “to be out of sight and out of mind”... this is powerful and very descriptive language. What is happening, it is suggested, is that powerless debtors are being sold into slavery for as little as a pair of

shoes – probably a pair of shoes that have been pawned on pledge without the capacity for repayment; and what can they do? The sequence of degradation doesn't even end there, however. The final injustice is that these poorest, who are now outside the recognised social system, and now become counted among the widows, the strangers and the fatherless, cannot even access the “sweepings of the wheat” to which they are entitled – remember how Ruth the Moabitess gathered the gleanings of the wheat when she first came to Judah as a foreigner, as custom afforded – yet the wheat merchants in Israel are leaving nothing for the poorest and are *selling* the sweepings of the wheat.

What Amos tells us, very eloquently and frighteningly, is that poverty, disadvantage and oppression are rarely an accident of circumstance, but rather the outcome of processes set to work against people, and once they get to work they proceed very rapidly to crush people. What Amos also tells us is how quickly all this can be and is *forgotten*, especially by the advantaged! And so he inveighs that even if people forget, God will not! “The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: surely I will never forget any of their deeds”!... one day, the feasting and merriment and comfortable living will come to an end in mourning and lamentation! (verse 10). Not content to leave it there, the final volley from the prophet is to warn that where social inequality has become the norm, it is usually accompanied by *spiritual death*. “The time is surely coming says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land: not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, (there's plenty of both of these – too much in fact), but rather a famine “of hearing the words of the Lord.” Under these circumstances the covenant relationship is forfeit. “They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.”

Amos presents to us a very vivid picture of how poverty and inequality embed themselves, and how, tragically, the comfortable and the privileged can come to live apart from and in ignorance of a set of

circumstances that has been created through social and economic processes which determines life for the poorest.... And the key themes appear to be *separateness and forgetfulness*, how separate our lives can become and how easily we can forget what is happening to others. In South Africa under apartheid the whole idea was precisely that communities should live and exist apart. Thankfully, this has been shown to be a terrible human heresy and depravity and it has been undone. It remains, however, from all accounts I ever hear of present life in South Africa, a major struggle for the nation to progress to anything approaching equality. But that problem is not theirs alone by any means. Separateness is alive and well in Britain and Birmingham. You only have to do some Christian Aid collecting in Edgbaston to know about this. Our challenge of course is how to overcome separateness. It is something we try to do in various initiatives between our schools for example, and among local partners here in Edgbaston, and a good example was the Srebrenica commemoration on Wednesday night when Bosnians and others, thus Muslims and Christians, came together to remember a European genocide which we have mostly allowed ourselves to forget. We all know, however, that these are only very small steps and there is much estrangement and mistrust to be overcome. Yet my own view would be that every gesture we make to overcome differences and to bridge cultures is worth doing, because this way can become part of a new humanity.

There is an associated, additional matter here which is perhaps even more troubling and unsettling, which is exposed when we ask the question as to 'what separate world was inhabited by the young French-Tunisian man Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel who drove a lorry into fellow residents of his city out to celebrate Bastille Day?' Principally, of course, our present thoughts are with the people of Nice and the French nation in their grief and distress. Yet it cannot escape our notice that this was a local man who lived alongside his neighbours, yet was surely inhabiting another world altogether – a world of deranged reality, but certainly

another world. The analysis of Amos suggests to us, I think, that when we ask the natural question, 'How can an act of such terrible violence and hatred be conceived and perpetrated?.... out of what mindset, and out of what distorted reality?' We also have to go on to ask, 'What are we doing to create or re-create a world in which the dire and dangerous separateness of global communities is overcome and global inequality is dismantled? And what are we doing to undermine the grounds for resentment and hatred that are nursed, and get translated into acts of terrifying revenge? If we want to travel to a situation where there can be anything describable as lasting peace, surely one of our objectives must be to find new ways for separateness to be overcome, so that humanity can be retrieved.

1666 Words
Reverend Julian Francis
17.7.2016.