Genesis 18 20-33

The last few weeks have seen some terrible acts of violence by so called lone wolves. We saw how one man was able to drive along the Esplanade of Nice and mow down families celebrating Bastille Day. He killed 84 and left many more seriously injured. Earlier this week another young man armed with an axe and a knife mercilessly wielded them on innocent passengers on a train in Bavaria. Then yesterday another young man shot dead eight people in a shopping centre. They were all immigrants.

Some five years ago I was leaving the school, just after the bell had rung. There was a stream of children leaving the building. I was walking quickly because I had bus duty and the first buses were on their way. I found myself walking behind a group of our older students. The tallest was talking loudly about immigrants and his vocabulary and the tone of his voice were negative. As I got level, I turned to look at this guy, grinned at him and said, “You do know I’m an immigrant?” His friends fell about laughing and the young man sputtered, “Oh Mr Robinson, I didn’t mean you”. I escaped the collective condemnation, but the euphoria that greeted the immigrants just a year ago has all but evaporated. There are still hundreds of thousands of people prepared to give of their time and talents to give immigrants a new start. But there is a growing fear of the consequences of this influx of people and this might give rise to a collective condemnation of immigrants.

This morning’s first reading is taken from the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis. It contains some of the oldest stories in the Bible but we have no clear idea, who and when these stories were brought together as a whole. This story unfolds one of the most serious problems that are found in some of these stories and others in the Old Testament. It is the problem of collective guilt. What on earth am I talking about? You have only to read the books of people such as Richard Dawkins or Daniell Dennett to see that they claim that the Christian religion is the cause of much suffering and death. Beginning with the stories in the Old Testament they proceed to name various atrocities which are the direct result of Jewish and later Christian ideas of God. So collective guilt is where whole groups or cities are wiped out, because they are guilty. I cannot begin to rebut their arguments in the space of 15 minutes. That is an insult to them and also to you. What I can do is to open up this reading, so that we may see the beginning of an alternative.

So we begin with God talking to Abraham. Just before this reading, God reveals the reason for the meeting. He says, “Because of the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. I am sure that you noticed the word outcry is repeated twice. The Hebrew za qa is a technical legal term and means the cry for help which one who suffers a great injustice screams. It is like the emergency phone calls the police in Munich received on Friday evening. God as the guardian of all rights, must respond. Where does this picture of God come from? It is found in the story of Cain and Abel. After the murder of Abel, God says to Cain, “What have you done? Listen your brothers blood cries out to me form the ground. This God is not indifferent to murder, the blood of the innocent of Nice and Augsburg and München cries out to heaven for a response. But God is not concerned with punishing Sodom, but rather with an investigation of the case.

So the men who are with God are sent to Sodom to find out for themselves, if the outcry is evidence based.

Then begins a fascinating conversation. It takes place on the heights east of Hebron. Below them as they talk and at a distance lies the city of Sodom. A city that has no idea of its judge or its defence lawyer. As in the case of every legal proceeding, the most important question is , “Is Sodom guilty?” There is no discussion of this point. The guilt is so obvious, that both God and Abraham accept it to be true. But Abraham raises a revolutionary question. Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? This is the charge of the atheists against God, he is not a God of justice, but a sadistic monster.

For much of the ancient period in the history of Israel, both in earthly and in divine justice followed the idea of wiping out cities and tribes. This was and sadly still is the way that most communities and nations operate. It is called collective guilt. So if there is an attempted putsch or revolution as in Turkey, you immediately imprison all those soldiers and airmen who took part in the action , you imprison hundreds of judges, you sack thousands of teachers and academics and none of these people are protected by law from imprisonment without trial or torture or as seems likely execution. Or if a group of ISIS commanders are in a house in Iraq, it is legitimate to bomb the house, even though the intelligence might be reliable and innocent families nearby will die too. AS you can see, the real world leads to some very difficult moral choices. For it is probably true that a house and a neighbourhood providing shelter to ISIS cannot be described as innocent. Or a better argument , would be the lesser of two evils. It is better for twenty people to be killed in a bomb attack, than for ISIS to operate successfully. But what if the commanders had left an hour earlier? Here we see the imperfections of human knowledge and justice?

But this haggling between God and Abraham shows something that is present in the Old Testament. A small number of innocent people is sufficient for God not to bring judgement upon a whole city. “So predominant is God’s will to save over his will to punish! What God revealed of himself and his justice was obviously not clear to the early leaders of Israel. They followed the Spirit of the Age, the Spirit also of our own age and lumped guilty and innocent into one boat. Whether it be schoolboys or Heads of government, it is easier to make enemies and slogans than to honour justice. But the concept of justice is woven into the warp and weft of the Old Testament. Eventually, this glimpse of the God who defers sentencing because of a few innocent, becomes narrowed down to one. Isaiah ch 53, “It is not the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer. The righteous sufferer who is to redeem the world and avert the wrath of God, become God himself. So God is not a sadisitic monster who is indifferent to suffering. He would not get a part in game of thrones or be a judge in Good wives. No this is the God to whom the cries of the innocent and the bloodied victim are heard. This is the God who weeps and also the God who acts to bring true justice on this earth. He will not hurt or destroy that which is innocent, but he shall return to be our judge. Have no fear of that day, For as Mother Julian of Norwich said, “Then all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well. “ No more terror, no more slavery, no more killing, no more hurt and no more fear. Yes , all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well. In the meantime, let us “do justice and righteousness . Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed.(and) Do no wrong or harm to the immigrant, the fatherless or the widow. “ Jeremiah 22v 3