When he saw the crowds  
By The Rev’d Duncan Dormor,  
Dean, St John’s College

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

May I speak in the name and to the glory of the Living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  

Or as I so often think, as I stand on my hind-legs – ‘try to speak’: For today, on this last Sunday of term with the May Ball preparations in full swing, parties and celebrations, joyful celebrations of community life underway in this wonderful and privileged bubble world which we inhabit - there are very, very different voices to be heard including those that said:

‘Unless someone does something – people will die’

An horrific tragedy in one of the poorest wards in one of the richest boroughs of one of the wealthiest cities in the world. And we have seen the extreme distress of separated families, including that of the brothers of the first victim to be named, a Syrian refugee, Muhammed, racked by his brother’s dying words to him rebuking him for abandoning him (clearly not his fault in any way). The stories of babies and children being thrown from windows and caught by individuals with the confidence and courage to encourage adults likely to die to throw those most precious to them into the night. We may well have heard London’s fire Chief, Commissioner Dany Cotton, talk of the unprecedented nature of the fire, and got a clear sense that this is a woman who has seen a lot, and admired afresh the raw human courage required to fight fires. We will, doubtless, have all contemplated, if only for a moment, the scenario of being stuck high in a tower block with no means of escape. We will also have witnessed the out-pourings of solidarity and charity and hospitality; the ‘Pray for our Community’ wall for expressions of grief, loss, hope and goodwill; and, the gatherings that such tragedies foster to bring comfort, to remember, to honour, to pray.

In the case of London and Manchester the source of the tragedy - if not entirely comprehensible - is known. In the case of the tragedy at Grenfell Tower – it looks increasingly like the blame lies in another direction – with gross negligence – with decisions made for cladding £2 cheaper per square metre because they lack the initials FP - ‘fire protected’ next to them: Economic inequality a clear part of the equation, but it is more than simply that. At its heart we have what is often described as ‘structural sin’ – that is the ways in which fundamental injustices are built into the institutions and operations of society, rending the poor voiceless; unattended to; ignored; their moral equality as persons effectively denied. A fundamental disregard has prevented the operation of what one might call ‘cold-blooded kindness’ – that is the thoughtful, rational, sensible action by those with the power, responsibility and authority to do so.

Such an abdication or failure on the part of the powerful and wealthy is repeatedly condemned by the prophets of the Old Testament who pour down scorn on those who ‘join house to house, field to field’ but who neglect ‘the widow and the orphan’.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.  
The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk
© Duncan Dormor
And indeed in speaking of ‘sheep without a shepherd’ Jesus picks up on a well-established metaphor for political leadership in Israel, that of the shepherd, and for its failure – scattered and helpless sheep. He then authorises his own followers to step up, to realise that the ‘somebody’ who ‘must do something’ is them; that they must take responsibility, not for the right exercise of political power – though God knows he need wisdom in that area in our world today - but that of the kingdom of justice and peace and righteousness, for the tasks of healing and reconciling and the casting out of evil. Of course this commission involves Christians in extending (directly or indirectly) healing ministries to the urban and rural poor of the two-thirds world – in improving access to health care in the broadest sense. And there is a very literal dimension to the gospel message. But we must also be closely attentive to the world in which we live and in which we will work – whether we are teachers or lawyers or lecturers or councillors or health and safety consultants - we are all called to attend closely to the brokenness of the world in all its varieties – amongst the individuals who are lost, lost to despair, depression, apathy, grief, hedonism or the seductions of greed or personal ambition – amongst the systems and processes that seek to ensure equity and dignity to all.

We can, of course, see something of the proclamation of God’s Kingdom, of the transforming, renewing, healing life in God - in North Kensington - in the volunteers giving freely of their money and time, and in the people expressing righteous indignation and anger - speaking out to challenge abuse, to advocate for others, to seek redress injustice - and to strive to bring healing and reconciliation to individuals and communities. Labourers in the field seeking to transform and renew - may the Lord be with them – and with us too that we may ever strive to pray and act to bring about your coming Kingdom. Amen