

A sermon preached by The Bishop of Coventry, Christopher Cocksworth on the occasion of The High Sheriff's Legal Service at The Collegiate Church of St Mary, Warwick on 14<sup>th</sup> October 2021  
Readings: Matthew 5.1-12; Ephesians 6.10-20

## **Introduction**

High Sheriff, thank you for gathering us together in person. After the deprivations of the last 18 months, it is simply wonderful to see people again in their full human reality. It's such a joy to be with people again in our full physical humanity, and to be together as a community – as representatives of our communities and institutions of Warwickshire (and in the presence of other counties) bound together as we are in a common purpose to serve the people of this beautiful part of God's world.

I've missed the splendour of this service, and the dignity of the procession. It's very good for the humility of a bishop to be outdressed in church by others who are look far grander than an ecclesiastic.

The past months have been extraordinarily demanding for all of us, personally and professionally. May I – High Sheriff – take the liberty of the pulpit to express my great admiration and deep appreciation (and I am sure yours) for the way our institutions of governance, health and care, education, law and order, and church and other religious communities, all our services – social services, fire service, police service, armed services – rose to the challenges of Covid and made such rapid adjustments to the necessities of the times.

There's still a long way to go before our county, our region, our society – and all the nations of the world, especially the world's poor – will recover and heal from the trauma we have been through. And I imagine the pressures on the legal system have been immense, and that the backlog of cases weighs heavily on you. But there are very many people in here today who have given their all to sustain our common life and see our people through these difficult days. To adapt Jesus' words: 'Blessed are those who've got us through Covid, they – we – deserve a jolly good Christmas bonus!'

### **Tensions between the law and its purposes**

We are indebted to the High Sheriff not only for gathering us together today but also for her choice of two profound readings for us to reflect on today. At first glance, they're helpful for affirming the work of a lawyer. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, talked about how he intended to fulfil the law and the prophets – a sort of new Moses, assuming a role as a lawgiver. And St Paul's letter to the Ephesians talks about 'fastening the belt of truth' and wearing the 'the breastplate of righteousness, or justice'. So far so good...

But both readings, I think, present us with some challenges. The subtext of Jesus' virtuous attitudes – the Beatitudes as they are known – is a critique of the way the law was being applied in his society. He talks about coming to *fulfil*, not replace, the existing law, but revealing its true intention.

The passage from the letter to the Ephesians speaks about 'rulers...authorities...cosmic powers of this present darkness'. Strange language, perhaps, but it doesn't take much historical memory to see how states have used legal mechanisms to enforce rule **by** law (as opposed to rule **of** law) – Nazi Germany, apartheid in South Africa, racist laws in the United States.

Most of us – lawyers as well, I assume – have struggled with this tension between our high hopes for the law and the ability of human beings and systems to use and abuse the law to dash those hopes. We despair at the imperfections of legal systems when they fail to protect the most vulnerable, or when it appears that they can be easily manipulated for sinister ends by those with power and money. Indeed, the Christian story is rooted in a situation in which the law fails. And we are justifiably baffled that a man who preached meekness, peace, mercy and righteousness could have met a death by brutal execution, under the law.

### **The burden of the lawyer**

My father worked in the legal profession. I remember him showing me as a young boy his rather dingy offices in New Square London, next to Lincoln's Inn. We met the elegant but forbidding figure of the senior partner. 'My boy', he said to me, 'are you going to follow your father into the law'. My father, a generally mild man, retorted, unusually forcefully, 'Not over my dead body'.

There were probably many reasons for my father wanting to route me in a different direction, but I suspect that behind them all were the sentiments of St Augustine in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, who asked why any good person would consent to exercise the office of judge and judge fellow humans when to do is so difficult. [I should add say that ‘going into the church’, as he would put it was also not one of my father’s preferred routes either, but that’s another story.]

Although these readings don’t provide easy applications to the legal profession, as we dig deeper into them we find several clues to how the rule *of* law can be preserved to ensure that it does not become rule *by* law. In other words, how to safeguard the law as a way we order our lives together to protect our fundamental rights, liberties and dignity, and avoid the law being manipulated to deny them.

### **Acknowledging God’s law, spotting abuses, growing virtues**

The Letter to the Ephesians reminds us that the highest law is the law of God. God’s will for truth, justice, peace stands sovereign over every legal code and is the standard by which all our laws are to be themselves judged.

That means that we need some good early warning detectors to spot when the law is used by – as St Paul would call them – the principalities, powers and rulers – to preserve themselves and their privileges rather than to protect the ordinary person and promote his or her wellbeing. Those warning lights were not heeded in Nazi

Germany and South American dictatorships of the last century, and they don't look very effective in today's Russia or China.

But at the risk of being a little provocative, I enjoyed walking through the almost deserted Houses of Parliament on the day when Lady Hale had judged that they had been prorogued against the true meaning of the law, as she ordered the Government back to its benches.

Jesus shows us how we can best develop the sorts of antennae that spot where legal systems are not fulfilling their God-given purpose and how we can create robust instincts for truth, justice, and peace building in our society.

All that, says Jesus, is best done not so much by minutiae of regulations and multiplication of laws but by growing virtuous people: people – lawyers but not only lawyers, all of us, especially in positions of influence and responsibility – virtuous people who 'hunger and thirst for righteousness', people who are 'merciful' who strive after a 'purity of heart' and 'humility of spirit', people who are 'peace makers' – committed to The Queen's Peace that truly seeks the peace of God; and elsewhere Jesus speaks of those who love the truth, protect the needy, defend the exploited, expose hypocrisy and call out prejudice.

It is as we grow these virtues among ourselves and our children and grandchildren that our society will have the

capacity to construct good law and to spot when it is being corrupted and to put that right.

In growing these virtues among us, St Augustine was confident in his day that – even in the face of the heavy burdens of administering the law – there would be no shortage of honourable judges to do so.

‘In view of the darkness that attends the life of human society’, Augustine said, ‘will our wise man – and woman – take their seat on the judge’s bench, or will they not have the heart to do so? Obviously, they will sit; for the claims of human society constrain them and draw them to their duty; and it is unthinkable to them that they should shirk it’.

Thank you that you did not shirk your calling to administer the law and make judgments that serve God’s ways of truth, justice and peace-making, and protects our common life and preserves our individual rights, liberties and dignities.