

9<sup>th</sup> October 2022

I must admit to a feeling of awe beholding a congregation in uniform, many bewigged and all bewitching, and to preach in the presence of the Lord Lieutenant. I remember when I was Bishop of Hull standing with the tall and imposing Lord Lieutenant, Richard Marriot, waiting to welcome the Duchess of Kent to the Longhill Estate. A little lad squeezed his way to the front of the crowd, poked his head between me and the Lord Lieutenant in his Blues uniform and shouted – ‘is he the Salvation Army?’; then to me in my purple cassock, ‘And are you the Pope?’. (When you get to be a bishop in the Church of England you take the compliments where you find them!)

It’s an honour to preach for the High Sheriff, James Lambert, especially in this historic year of Her Late Majesty’s death and the Accession to the Throne of His Majesty the King, because our whole judicial system derives its authority from the Crown hence we talk about Crown Courts and His Majesty’s Prisons.

The length of our late Queen’s reign means that the Nation has not seen a Coronation Service for nearly seven decades. The ritual, the symbols and the words point up the constitutional significance of the Crown to our whole judicial system.

When in the Service the Sovereign receives the Rod the Archbishop will say,

“Receive the Rod of Equity and Mercy/ Be so merciful that you be not too remiss/ So execute justice that you forget not mercy/ Punish the wicked/ Protect and cherish the just.”

When later the Sovereign is given the Sword of State He will hear these words, “With this sword do justice” and then, “ Help and defend widows and orphans”.

Thus at the heart of the Coronation, of what is, in effect, our Constitution, we find these imperatives to be just and merciful, and to protect those made lonely by being widowed and orphaned. These are our nation’s values.

A Legal Service such as this, that gathers together those called in various ways to the administration of justice here in the North East, helps to refresh our vision of creating a just and merciful society. These two principles are an expression of the two pillars of God’s Kingdom – Justice and Mercy, both of which flow from the love of God.

I know that over the last two years judicial services have felt the strain of Lockdown which has placed not just the system but many people under huge stress. I know many have reached breaking point. But unexpectedly and perhaps paradoxically it has also opened our eyes to an important aspect of prison punishment. We’ve become aware of just how punitive and depressing is the experience of enforced isolation. We’ve felt its impact on our own mental well-being and we’ve seen the negative effect of isolation on others; we’ve all felt something of the punishment that prisoners experience through their incarceration. Contrary to tabloid caricature isolation is never a picnic.

Earlier this year I was privileged to chair an Independent Commission and to publish a Report that looked into the experiences of both victims and offenders sentenced to long periods in prison.

Over the last 40 years the average time a lifer spends in prison has gone from 9 years to 18 years; and in the last 20 years the number of offenders serving a sentence of more than ten years has trebled from 2,724 to 8,720.

The question we looked at was whether the length of time spent in His Majesty's Prisons fulfilled the purpose of sentencing: to punish, to protect the public, to reduce crime, to reform and to rehabilitate the offender.

One of our conclusions was that the content of the sentence was as important as its length. Unless we devote as much money and focus to the content of a prison sentence as we do to its length, and address issues of drug addiction, mental health, education and skills then, however long the sentence, the offender will come out of prison as dangerous as when they went in. Without reform and rehabilitation there will be little reduction in re-offending, no reduction in crime and society will be no safer.

Spending time in isolation is debilitating and depressing. But that loneliness is not confined to prisoners. Our High Sheriff has made it one of his priorities this year that we should all become more aware of rural isolation and poverty. He wishes to highlight the many local voluntary and charitable initiatives that have sprung up to meet the needs of those who find themselves alone.

In our own Yorkshire village of some two hundred through the pandemic period seven people have died. What's impressed and inspires me is the way that other villagers have come forward to mitigate the loneliness of the bereaved, of the 'widow and the orphans', in very practical ways. It shows something very important about human society. Not all our problems can be addressed by the Crown institutions of the State or even by the Independent and Voluntary Sector.

Creating a just and merciful society, especially in this time of economic and social crisis, is the vocation and moral responsibility of us all individually, each and every one of us. The quality of today's society will depend on the conscience and decency of us all personally.

This vocation is beautifully captured by one of the prayers from the Holy Communion Service in the Book of Common Prayer which is the essence of the Coronation Service. It does not mention the words 'justice and 'mercy' but those sentiments and imperatives are embedded in this appeal to our souls.

And with this prayer I conclude: "And to all thy people give thy heavenly grace; and specially to this congregation here present; that with meek heart and due reverence, they may hear, and receive thy holy word; truly serving thee in holiness and righteousness all the days of their life. And we most humbly beseech thee of thy goodness, O Lord, to comfort and succour all them, who in this transitory life are in trouble, sorrow, need, sickness or any other adversity."

Let all the people say, 'Amen'.

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