

## LAW SUNDAY MATTINS WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL 8<sup>th</sup> OCTOBER 2017

Micah 6; 6 – 8 and St John 5; 22 – 29

### Prayer

In the days before the Supreme Court when the Law Lords gave their judgements in the chamber of the House of Lords they always began with prayers. I remember my first time at leading them. Sat on the Bishops Bench on the right of the Throne and opposite their lordships I picked up the Order Paper. It was headed rather ominously: 'Judgement Day' and even more disconcertingly immediately underneath it: 'The Lord Bishop of Liverpool', as if I were the first up!

Not a million miles from here the poet and priest, George Herbert, gave advice to parsons on the art of preaching. He warned them that 'especially country folk are thick and heavy' and 'hard to raise to the point of zeal and fervency'. You'll be relieved to know that that was Diocese of Salisbury!

But he nevertheless advised that it would be good to pepper a sermon with 'the sayings of others'. So, taking a leaf out of his book let me quote from an eminent judge, none other than a recent Lord Chief Justice, Lord Igor Judge, who preached at this very service nine years ago.

In his book 'The Safest Shield' he has the notes of an address he gave to newly appointed Recorders. He confesses that you cannot teach 'the essential judicial qualities' but he lists them as patience, fortitude, determination and courage. And then he adds, 'and humility – yes, humility – to do what you believe to be right.'

The law can, of course, make some of its practitioners arrogant and haughty (none, of course, in this congregation) not least because it delivers into the hands of judges, magistrates, Probation Officers, and the Police the right to exercise power over the lives of others. So, to hear a Lord Chief Justice encourage his colleagues to do so with humility is note-worthy.

In July of this year the Supreme Court gave its judgement on whether fees imposed by the Lord Chancellor should be levied in respect of Employment Tribunals. Their Lordships made a direct appeal to the Magna Carta. 'We will sell to no man, we will not deny or defer to any man either justice or right'. It prompted the Court to determine, 'The(se) words ... are a guarantee of access to the courts which administer justice promptly and fairly'. What was at stake, then and now, was access to justice for ordinary people.

This year marks the 800<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the third iteration of the Magna Carta which was sealed by William Marshall in 1217. The Magna Carta is of interest in this corner of England because as well as guaranteeing access to justice it also granted to all freemen access to the forests. Until the 13<sup>th</sup> Century forests had been the preserve of kings. Now they were available to others for food, for fuel and for farming.

The Magna Carta granted access both to Justice and to Nature thus civilising England's landscape, legally, physically, and culturally.

(It would not surprise me if as the United Kingdom withdraws from the European Union and its legislative mantle that there will be many more such appeals to the Magna Carta, especially from groups who feel that their environment is threatened and that their access to the courts is too costly.)

The Magna Carta provokes a proper sense of humility towards both justice and nature. Indeed, the origin of the word 'humility' lies literally in the soil. Humus is the Latin for earth. The humble, those possessed of true humility, are connected to the ground, hewn from the soil, and tread the earth lightly. Therein lies our origin and our destiny. 'From the earth, thou hast come and to the earth shalt thou return.'

This calling to humility is captured in the Hebrew Scriptures: 'What does the Lord require of you? But to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God'. Here in Scripture is the link between justice and humility. It is a calling to all humanity to walk humbly but particularly to those who are called to exercise judgement; judges, barristers, solicitors, legal executives, and all those found in the legal service. It is humility not just before God but before humanity itself. Not shying away from tough and unpopular decisions, yet at the same time acknowledging the image of God in the most recalcitrant offender however marred that image might be.

There's a humility to be found in the modern office of High Sheriff. In this service she's the convener of all those involved in the administration of justice; but throughout her tenure and, like other High Sheriffs, she is to be found reaching out to the vulnerable and to the victims of crime and to the restoration of offenders. Blending justice with mercy.

In our Gospel reading we learn that God "the Father judges no one but has given all judgement to the Son". It is a surprising statement. It shows judgement being exercised by one who has fully shared our humanity, who knew temptation to sin as we do and who wrestled with the throes and woes of evil. The judgement of God is placed in the hands of the One who humbled himself and became one of us 'from the womb to the tomb'. For all in the justice system who have anything to do with the punishment and restoration of offenders Jesus is the example of the One who judges with humility.

Lord Igor Judge reminded the Recorders and all who administer justice, 'You are entrusted with enormous power over your fellow human beings. People's lives will be in your hands'.

Yours, therefore, is an awesome calling.

St Augustine, Confucius, and Rabindranath Tagore each contributed to Civilisation in the East and the West. Each believed humility to be the foundation of all the other virtues. It is the civilising virtue. And the erosion of it is the undoing of civilised society for as John Buchan wrote, 'without humility there can be no humanity'.

In George Herbert's own poem called 'Humility' he paints a picture of all the virtues seated on an azure throne and writes of,

'Humility, who sat the lowest there'.

As the poem unfolds he shows how humility 'did weep so fast, that the tears (came) trickling down....'.

He could have been writing about Our Lord.

He might even have been writing about Judgement Day.

So, as Jane Austen, whose body lies in this place, prayed, and encouraged us to pray,

"Incline us, Oh God, to think humbly of ourselves".

Amen

The Right Reverend James Jones KBE

