

HIGH SHERIFF OF BUCKINGHAMSHIRE TO MARK THE LEGAL YEAR

“WHEN MERCY SEASONS JUSTICE”

Friends, on behalf of all your guests we are honoured to be called your friends this day.

To ask one Church of England bishop to a Quaker Meeting is to threaten the foundations of the building, to ask two is to tempt an earthquake! Given the early history of the relationship between Quakers and bishops the very presence of Alan and myself is a wonderful example of the grace of Quakers and of ‘mercy seasoning justice’.

This Shakespeare quotation is also a perfect description of the life’s work of your highly esteemed High Sheriff whose exemplary public service has been devoted to channelling the grace of opportunity to others. She is the epitome of civic leadership that is determined to shape a society that is both just and merciful.

The glorious Coronation of The King and The Queen, the like of which we had not seen for some seven decades, held before us the foundations of our unwritten constitution. For those with the eyes to see, it showed how the authority of our judicial system is derived directly from the Sovereign – hence His Majesty’s Courts and His Majesty’s Prisons. And for those with the ears to hear, in Westminster Abbey the very character of our society was engraved with The Sovereign’s obedience to the pledge ‘to execute justice that you forget not mercy.’

My friends, in this historic Jordans Centre, the ‘Quaker Westminster Abbey’ as Simon Jenkins has put it, the resting place of William Penn, the champion of a free society, we here today affirm that a civilised and free society can be built only on the two principles of Justice and Mercy.

Act justly by upholding the law; act mercifully by punishing the offender with mercy.

Of course, not everybody wants to be so gracious when a terrible offence is committed. Nor should they be. Those of us who favour prison reform often overlook the righteous anger that victims and their families have every right to feel when they've been violated by a terrifying crime.

Last year I chaired an Independent Commission on the effect of Long Term Sentences on both victims and offenders. Interestingly in spite of widespread interest in our Report the only religious organisation to follow it up with me apart from the Bishop to Prisons was the Quaker Justice Network.

The question we addressed was whether ever-lengthening sentences served the five statutory purposes of sentencing – to punish the offender, to protect the public, to reduce crime, to reform and to rehabilitate the prisoner.

Over the last 40 years the average length of a life sentence has gone up from 9 years to 18 years; and over the last 20 years the number of prisoners serving a sentence of 10 years or more has nearly trebled from 2700 to 8700.

What we found was that longer sentences certainly punished the offender and protected the public in the short term, but did very little to reform and rehabilitate the prisoner without which society will be no safer. If a person comes out of prison after a long sentence as dangerous as when they went in the public are not protected in the longer term.

It seems to me that the only way to reduce crime is to reform the criminal and the way to do that is to focus more on the content of the sentence than on the length of it.

If we spent the hundreds of millions of pounds that longer sentences cost on training, education, therapy and restorative justice then sentencing would serve its purposes more faithfully. The length of the sentence delivers the justice; the content of the sentence delivers the mercy.

But I sometimes wonder if as a society we are becoming strangers to mercy. The media, both mainstream and social, have become such channels of mercilessness in the way we treat not just public figures but any with whom we disagree. Even our universities have become places that mercilessly shun those that challenge the prevailing view and mood. Universities are surely with us to outwit and not to outlaw the dissenter.

A gathering such as this is a plea to season justice with mercy. How good it is that our worship today embraces so many Faith Community leaders. This would gladden the heart of William Penn. We know that although in our history we have often failed to be merciful to one another nevertheless our sacred texts amplify the call to be mutually merciful.

And for me as a Christian I am only too aware of that 'quality of mercy (which) is not strain'd' ... 'that droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven ...' . To taste and to know mercy is the very beginning of the imperative to be merciful as well as just. But let us give the last word to Shakespeare. This mercy

"It is enthroned in the heart of Kings;

It is an attribute to God himself;

And earthly power doth then show likest God's

When mercy seasons justice."

Amen

The Right Reverend James Jones KBE

29th September 2023

