

**Welcome, Bidding Prayer and Homily by Revd Jonathan Aitken to
the Central Criminal Court Annual Carol Service, The Great Hall,
The Old Bailey, London, E.C. 4.**

May I welcome you all to this Annual Central Criminal Court Carol Service.

It is a joy and a triumph that we are able to be here in this year of the Pandemic.

So my first pleasant duty is to thank all those who have worked so hard to make this Service possible, despite the Covid obstacles.

May I particularly thank the organiser of this evening, His Honour Judge Anthony Leonard, QC and his entire team who have coped so magnificently.

Just before the end of the Service I will thank our Readers and the celebrated Old Bailey Choir, who, from experience, I know will sing our carols beautifully.

I now thank Imam Suhel Mulla, who intoned the Azzan, the Moslem Call to Prayer, with such spine tingling resonance before the start of this Service.

And also my fellow officiator, the Reverend Sarah Whitehouse QC, who so felicitously combines silk and spirituality in her two vocations.

Finally, I thank all you distinguished and eminent guests for coming here, especially the Sheriffs and the Lord Mayor Locum Tenens.

In this brief homily I want to highlight two themes which are relevant to this unusually challenging Christmas – gratitude and resilience.

Gratitude needs to be expressed to all of you who serve at the Central Criminal Court.

You have kept the show on the road. You have kept the wheels of Justice turning. You have kept these Courts open. Thank you for this very considerable achievement.

I know the pressures on you have been enormous.

Indeed, I see these pressure and the anguish of them close up and painfully in my work as a Prison Chaplain at HMP Pentonville whose distinguished Governor, Ian Blakeman, is here this evening.

He runs a prison just a mile or so from here which contains over one thousand inmates, 60 per cent of whom are on remand.

Their frustrating difficulties in getting information about Court dates.

Their distressing postponements of their Trials on charges for which they may be innocent.

Have escalated from 3 to 6 months of delays in 2019 to 18 to 24 months of delays at the end of this year of Covid.

Of course, I know these problems are not the fault of those of you who administer justice in this historic building. The longest delays have not occurred here, but in other London Courts like Snaresbrook and Wood Green.

Here, you deserve congratulations for completing over 60 major trials of Murder cases and other serious cases in the past 9 months.

For reinstating Jury Trials last May.

And for opening a new Old Baily Court Room located in the Royal Courts of Justice next week.

So thank you for the part you have played in the struggle to overcome the effects of the Pandemic in the arena of Criminal Justice.

But please do keep in mind that the old saying 'Justice delayed is Justice denied' is for those at the sharp end of the system, not just an axiom, but an agony.

Resilience, my second theme, is a sterling British quality.

It was shown here in abundance in the 1940's when the bombs and the doodle bugs were blitzing this part of London.

There was resilience in the Christmas Story too.

The character in the Nativity whose resilience shines most brightly is Mary.

In the interfaith spirit of this Service, I will mention her in the context of the words of the Prophet Mohammed, who is recorded as saying in one beautiful Hadith:

"Paradise lies at the feet of Mothers."

Now we have all got mothers, and I expect they did have Paradisical feelings when they first held us in their arms as new born babies.

But in the run up to Jesus's birth Mary's feelings had a rough ride.

“Do not be afraid, Mary,” said the Angel Gabriel to her when he gave her the astounding news that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

In an age when, in the hill villages of Judea, unmarried mothers were ostracized in disgrace and sometimes stoned to death in disgrace the Angel’s annunciation must have been alarming.

The preparations for the birth of Jesus were alarming too.

For he was not a baby delivered safely in the NHS Bethlehem Maternity Hospital.

He had a rough, uncomfortable, probably insanitary birth in a manger with the oxen, rather than the Gynaecologists, standing by.

And after the birth Mary had to flee in terror from the mass slaughter of infant babies in Bethlehem by the Tyrant King Herod.

So she needed resilience at every stage of the Christmas Story.

And here and now in the 21st century, many people have needed resilience this year.

I enjoy coming back to the Old Bailey to lead your Carol Service, because it reminds me of the time when I needed resilience.

Twenty-one years ago I was here as a Criminal Defendant standing in the Dock of Court No 1.

I pleaded guilty and left the building by the back door of Newgate Street, wearing handcuffs, as I clambered into a prison van taking me to start an 18 month sentence for Perjury in HMP Belmarsh.

Today things are rather better, I came in by the front door.

Instead of handcuffs I am wearing Church robes.

They are so conspicuously colourful that if I was back in HMP Belmarsh wearing a prison uniform cut from the same cloth, it would probably be stamped on the back with the warning 'High Risk Escaped Prisoner'!

Well the Wheel of Fortune, especially when propelled by God's Grace can turn in all lives.

And it can turn in the life of a Nation too.

Perhaps it may be turning now in this year of the Pandemic, when fears recede as the availability of vaccines advance.

So, with gratitude and resilience there is much to be thankful for as we begin our Carol Service.

But first please bow your heads in prayer.

THE BIDDING PRAYER

O God our Father, Lord of all lives and faiths.

We thank you for bringing us through the Pandemic,

Gathering us here together to offer you our praise and glory in this Service of readings and Carols.

Thank you for the dedicated work throughout the past difficult year of all who serve and dispense Justice in this historic building.

Thank you for the many agencies who come to the Old Bailey to support the work of the Courts.

And we pray for all those who serve or appear in the courtroom here.

Judges,

Counsel,

Court staff,

Court reporters,

Witnesses,

and Defendants.

May we hold all of them, and the entire system of British Justice in our prayers as we now say together the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father, which art in heaven,

hallowed be thy name;

thy kingdom come;

thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread;

and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us;

and lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Now let us begin our Service with the first reading from Genesis:

read by EUPHEMIA OKUNOR, a Clerk of the Court