

Law Sunday Service

at

Winchester Cathedral

Sunday 13th October 2019

Sermon by The Revd Jonathan Aitken

I take as my text - as old fashioned preachers used to say – not a verse of Scripture but a cartoon. A famous 19th century Punch Cartoon known as “The Curate’s Egg”. The cartoonist depicted a grand bishop entertaining a nervous young curate to breakfast.

As the curate slices the top off his boiled egg a noxious smell fills the air.

“Mr Jones you seem to have got a bad egg” said the Bishop, wrinkling his nose.

“Oh no my Lord” responded the curate:

“Parts of it are excellent”.

Uncomfortably for the context of today’s grand service, the curate’s egg cartoon is an all too painfully accurate metaphor for our 21st century system of Criminal Justice in Britain today.

Yes, some parts of the system, honoured in today’s ceremonial procession, are indeed excellent. We are blessed with an exemplary judiciary with a decent and honest police service. We have dedicated High Sheriffs, court officials, probation officers and other crown servants working in the field of justice.

BUT there is one part of the justice world which disturbingly often does give off a bad smell.

This is the chaotic state of some of our prisons.

Alas, the most dramatically portrayed recent example of this chaos, has been right here on your doorstep, in HMP Winchester.

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Some of you will have watched the current Channel 4 series "Crime and Punishment". Three episodes of it were filmed inside this city's prison.

To those of you who have not seen it, how I wish I could stop talking from this pulpit right now, press a button, and play you clips from the programmes.

For they accurately reported the appalling problems of:

- Drug-fuelled mayhem on the wings

- Suicide attempts

- Self-harmings

- Dirty protests

- Rampant Spice abuse

- Crumbling filthy infrastructure

- And brutal assaults on prison officers, whose morale was plummeting to the point where a third of them were handing in their resignations a year ago.

If we were watching these scenes now, I think many of you would be squirming in your seats.

Even as a seasoned former prisoner who served his time in Belmarsh, a tougher nick than Winchester and who now works as a Chaplain in Pentonville (a 19th century London prison which shares many of Winchester's problems) I was shocked. But perhaps the shock is no bad thing for it may have woken people up to just how serious the situation was becoming, behind the prison walls.

Paradoxically however, although the C4 coverage gave off a bad smell. It was not all bad news. For example, the heroes and heroines of the series, were the Winchester Prison Officers.

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At no small physical risk to themselves, they literally battled it out across the landings and nettings, in hand to hand combat with violent drug-fuelled prisoners on the rampage.

One programme rightly highlighted, the courage of the unprotected young prison officer Emma Beeson, who I believe is present here today. The episode when she was filmed taking a knife away from a deranged prisoner, was a shining example of fortitude and also a beacon of hope for the Prison's future.

Not just because of Emma but because there have been many similar episodes in which other brave officers have shown similar courage in carrying out their duties.

In the year since the Channel 4 series was made, hope for the prison has been slowly turning into a reality.

I know this because I have been doing my homework for this sermon.

And I assert with some confidence that HMP Winchester is becoming a recovery situation.

Although it still has some way to go, this recovery has already achieved many tangible results.

A new Governor and Deputy Governor, both of whom live in the local community have provided fresh leadership in the past twelve months.

Violence, self-harming, drug abuse and officer resignations are all falling.

And the staff are growing in competence and confidence.

Perhaps the best and hottest news is that two days ago the Ministry of Justice lifted the “Under Special Measures” restrictions meaning that Winchester is now regarded safe and decent enough to be categorised as a normal establishment.

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Now there is a spiritual dimension to these improvements.

A couple of years ago the chaplaincy of the Prison was also falling apart.

Its culture has been changed too, largely, sparing his blushes, through the work of Bishop David, Bishop of Basingstoke.

When the crisis was at its worst, he rolled up his purple sleeves, volunteered for front line duty in the chaplaincy and brought in exceptional new priests as full-time chaplains.

These changes have revolutionised this pivotal, practical and pastoral department of the prison.

And the work of the chaplaincy on the inside has been backed up on the outside by a co-ordinated wave of prayer from churches and prayer groups across the city.

From prayer, let me finish by returning to our Gospel reading – the parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

The central figure is the King who asks his startled audience in 1st Century Galilee some awkward questions such as:

Why did you not visit me when I was in prison?

If you reflect on them, the King's questions were really about justice.

Social justice

Human justice

Financial justice

Justice for refugees

Early Intervention Justice

And Prison justice.

These questions still are – or should be – at the heart of our 21st Century Society's values.

So I will end by drawing a mystical link between the heavenly King and the temporal power of the Crown and Crown servants, who administer justice in this country.

All of them, from the highest Judge of the Supreme Court to the youngest prison officer on duty on the wings of HMP Winchester, derive their authority from the Crown.

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Let's focus on this from an unusual angle.

Like one or two fellow ancient mariners in this congregation, I am just old enough to remember, as a schoolboy, the last Coronation service in 1953. I watched a film of it quite recently.

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Right at the start of the Coronation service, after the entrance of the Sovereign into Westminster Abbey, the Archbishop of Canterbury invites the new monarch to take the solemn Oath, and asks:

“Will you to your power cause Law and Justice, in Mercy, to be executed in all your judgements?”

Then after receiving of the Sword of State the Sovereign is sworn to:

“to do justice to stop the growth of iniquity ... and to punish and reform what is amiss”.

Then just before the most solemn moment of the Coronation, the service returns to the theme of Justice, as the Monarch is exhorted: “So execute justice - That you forget not mercy”. And then the Sovereign is crowned.

Fellow participants in this Law Service, be you judges or magistrates, police or prison officers, clerks or administrators of the courts, always remember that your authority as officers of the Crown, derives from this exposition of ancient Anglo Saxon Law, living on in the liturgy of the Coronation Service.

This is our history. This is our Constitution. Does it still matter today?

Surely it does because at a time when the foundations of our nation are rocking and swaying in the convulsions of Brexit, it is vitally important to know who we are.

To remember from whence we came and to recall the origin of our values - the Christian ethics and teachings that have shaped us, and the authority of the Crown.

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Jesus, who traced his own authority back to God, told the parable of the Sheep and Goats to shock his hearers into putting his moral justice at the heart of their lives.

We too may have been shocked by the problems of Winchester Prison.

But we should not separate them from that same moral justice ordained by the King in today's Gospel reading. **Amen**