

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

You will not see me until the time when you say, Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

We will come back to those words of Jesus from this morning's gospel, but first let me thank your preacher, the Venerable Sheila Watson for inviting me here today, and indeed, you for coming. One never knows whether possible hearers have been consulted about one's presence and, well, it's always encouraging to have a congregation.

So, here we are, wigs and mitres by moniker if not by costume this morning and from earliest times, long before there were wigs or mitres, we have been integral to one another: the law with religion, religion to the law. We, they, bear more comparison to one another than perhaps at first meets the eye. The Hebrew prophets railed against ancient Israel for their disregard of the law: in overflowing wrath, for a moment I abandoned you, thunders the voice of the prophet Isaiah, for the unrighteousness and injustice of God's people. But the compassion, the generosity which is at the heart of the life of faith triumphs: with an everlasting love, I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your redeemer. Justice and compassion, law and faith, even in the heart of the divine.

This close connection between law and religion is a significant point which it is easy to overlook in contemporary society. Where law and religion do appear in the same box, it is to the detriment of both: oppressive laws which constrain women, those who are same sex attracted and others, come from this intersection of our professions. Alternatively, law is here and faith here, our principles seen as polar opposites. Churches have compassion on criminals which the law would punish. The law would and should punish those churches who abused the young and vulnerable to whom they should have shown both mercy and love.

But I wonder if matters are as simple as that. It may be mythical, but it is also axiomatic, that love and justice are both blind and when we look at the issues on which both lawyers and ecclesiastics have recently taken stands, we see the outworking of that blindness in ways that challenge current assumptions and reaffirm our proximate relationship.

Take first the position of criminal barristers over legal aid. This, or so it seems to a mitre and presumably at least to some wigs, is a direct protest against the impossibility of the law being upheld if justice cannot be blind. If legal aid is not available to the poor who therefore cannot come to law, then justice is denied. If barristers are required to work for unsustainable rates, then again, justice is unavailable and therefore denied. Justice which is only available to the wealthy is no more justice than the justice dispensed after a legal process weighted with bribery. Justice which is not blind, justice which cannot speak without fear or favour, becomes not even the upholding of the black-letter law; and justice at its best should be much more than that.

The position of Bishops who have spoken in parliament against the oppression of the poor as benefits do not rise in line with inflation seems to me not dissimilar. Compassion requires that those, particularly children and the young, who are not able to make the choices which will lead to wealth or poverty and who are locked in situations of indigence, are supported and nurtured by wider society. But compassion must be blind if it is to act, for compassion which is not blind will see the choices of parents and others and risk making, if not actually make, decisions prejudicial for those not responsible for the earlier choices.

Both these instances, of legal aid and the benefit system, are issues of our time in which law and the church are intimately involved – not every church, not every lawyer, but at the level of the principles of our professions, these are issues in which we have a stake. This is not only so because generosity to the poor is something many of us would applaud; it is also the case because we

ourselves learn important points about the exercise of our calling from the dispensation of justice and the exercise of love.

In the, admittedly limited, number of court judgments handed down which I have read, I have always been struck by the effort expended in setting out the situation. Again and again, this has brought to mind those words from the gospel with which I began: *You will not see me until the time when you say, Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.* Whatever other questions confront us as clergy and lawyers, one above all stands out: what is it that we see? Do we see true? Does the blindness which is proverbial for love and for justice enable, as it should, proper seeing?

To see what is really there, to weigh and assess not on the basis of emotion and not on the basis of argument but on the basis of what is actually the case, is not to say, like Mr Gradgrind, that Facts alone are wanted in life. It is, rather, to do as Jesus laments that his people do not do, to accept that a given situation will modify our thinking rather than that our thinking can modify the situation. So far is this from looking at the world in the manner of Mr Gradgrind, that it is much more akin to receiving it with that affective attention which T.S. Eliot described in relation to the poet and divine John Donne: it modifies our sensibility. It is a form of blindness appropriate both to love and to justice, for it is a blindness to our own preferences and prejudices, a softening of our certainties so that our world view can be flexed and reimagined. It is this to which Jesus urges Jerusalem, urges us, asking for genuine encounter with another not as object, problem or threat, but as one who can modify our self-understanding and make somewhat more porous the rigid boundaries of self which we all construct.

So much is this willingness to be reshaped by what comes before us a characteristic of love and justice that we might even say that it is of their essence. Isaiah's God is often accused of inconstant and unpredictable behaviour – but there is much to be said for wrath which love can overcome,

for mercy bestowed justly. Jesus laments over Jerusalem not because its people do not adhere to the law of Moses but because they have exchanged the principle of that law for its letter, because there was a refusal of love and a breaking of right relationship as real as any protested against by striking barristers and argued against by bishops in parliament.

Restoring those relationships is the crying need of our time and the impetus in much of what, it seems to me, we seek to do in the church and in the legal profession. We strike, argue, protest and lament because we are not, for all that society seems to suggest, independent consumers but interdependent persons. To use an analogy current in farming, we seek to be in the business of regenerative agriculture, seeking the restoration of the soil for future generations as well as the growing of crops now. Even so, regenerative justice seeks the restoration of all those persons and relationships caught up in the cycles of sin, resentment, alienation and crime, so that they can make some sense of their plight and move forward. Regenerative justice is also an appropriate way to describe the Christian faith, for the precise purpose of the Incarnation, that overcoming of the way of death by the way of love, is our regeneration, our re-formation into the image and likeness of the creator restored to relationship with one another and with the God of heaven and earth. Only when we realise this will we be liberated from the fear which we see in so many eyes, the isolation which besets so many and the terror of which the whole world is afraid.

Let us, then, work and pray for that day to come and, in this time of waiting, let us ask for the gifts of blind justice and blind love, that seeing what is really the case, we might also see the Lord.

May it be so in your life and in mine, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.