



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

## LEGAL SERVICE 2019

My thanks to the Dean & Chapter for the hospitality of this pulpit – a generosity I hope they will not come to regret over the next 45 minutes or so....

In my last parish my old sacristan, a retired copper and a good and reliable friend, was full of bon mots and mots justes.

His chirpy and, for the most part, light-hearted observations were born of a lifetime of professional encounter with Fallen Man and, as he viewed it, the subsequent legal contest with the Bench. After one particularly bruising encounter with the latter he informed me that his collective noun for the judiciary was ‘an arrogance of judges’. In my own experience I have to say that the judges I have met or had to do with personally or professionally were no more likely to be arrogant than the next man – unless, of course, the next man happened to be an ambitious clergyman. I begin here, not as a provocation but because, both as servants of the Law and servants of the Church, our entire ministries have to begin by walking humbly before our God. If either of us, in the exercise of our spiritual or temporal powers, starts to arrogate, to claim the authority we exercise as our own fiefdom, we have dangerously lost touch with the divine reality whose justice and mercy we are called both to serve and to administer.

A priest begins his ministry lying flat on the floor before the altar acknowledging the absolute sovereignty of God and our dependence on

His mercy and grace. And, for me, the most beautiful of the many titles of the Pope is 'The Servant of the servants of God'. That, in the places we serve, is our calling too.

The Holy Scriptures have several different words for judges and judgement. They include the delightful Hebrew words for 'sifter' and 'discerner' – someone who is patiently sorting out the real stuff from the chaff, the truth from lies, one who has the gift of discretion. Central to the exercise of these offices is the gift of wisdom – and wisdom, with rare exception, is hard won by long service at the gate of humility.

When the great 6<sup>th</sup> century Roman Emperor, Justinian, built his masterpiece in the great city of Constantinople, a Christian empire of a thousand years, he dedicated the church to the Divine Wisdom – Hagia Sophia – without which, he recognised, no Christian Emperor could justly and faithfully rule.

In our first reading today we see the young king, Solomon, seeking that precious gift of God, Wisdom – the thing most necessary for good governance. He will be exemplary in the administration of justice and proverbial in wisdom. At least, that is, until his heart departs from God and he becomes the swirling epicentre of paganism and, in response to his lusts, the promoter of a multi-faith permissiveness and idolatry. As he departs from the Divine Wisdom his reign ends in complaint and a turmoil that will see the division of the kingdom and the destruction and exile of much of it.

In our second reading we see the climax of St. Paul's prayer that the people of God may be filled with the knowledge of God's will, spiritual wisdom and understanding. This, he proclaims, is to be found in Christ Jesus, the image of the invisible God, the manifestation in Man of the Divine Wisdom, the reconciler of Fallen Man. This is the source and summit of God's revelation.

So.....what of us?

An officer of the Law, that human law that is intended, in the society of a Christian civilisation, to reflect the supervening glory of the divine law, is, according to Scripture, to be a dispenser of reason and interim account. The final judgement on all of us belongs to God. That officer also sits at the place of crisis, the place where decision has to be made both for the individual and for society. His charism is, in some sense, a work of salvation. He comes at the end of the first stage of a long process and must defend the safety of the society whom the malefactor has grieved or wounded. But he is also aware of the need for restoration and the penance that pays due regard to the offence. In all this he is to be cognisant of the need for the mercy that may yet enable redemption. It is an awesome task and an awe-full responsibility.

In the front line of the justice system stands the police force.

They are seldom granted the luxury of reflection as they encounter Fallen Man at his most aggravated. Their decisions have to be instantaneous, often in physical peril, sometimes mortal. This requires a personal courage and moral discipline that is enviable. (I watched this first hand in my grandfather).

In the clear up unit wait the Probation Service dedicated to the long and often thankless work of rescue and restoration of overgrown and feral children, -victims of addiction and mental health problems – the collateral damage of someone else's neglect.

Working alongside them are the charitable works of mercy preparing the prisoner, penance paid, for a fresh encounter with freedom and opportunity. Patience and hopefulness melded with a gritty realism are the touchstone of this ministry.

The daily task of the restraint of chaos and the reclamation of the damaged soul falls to the Prison Service whose wardens and warders and chaplains work in that borderland between the values that society wishes to inculcate and the frequently disordered parallel society of prison culture. Courage and integrity must be a stock in trade of a good warder.

For all this we are all too aware that we meet here today as free men and women less because of our staggering claims to virtue than to the fact that your sins and mine are simply immoral and not illegal.

What is legal and what is moral are not co-terminous and we should be grateful that it is so.

But wherever the human law departs extravagantly from the Divine Law we are no longer in the business of permissive peccadilloes. We enter an *ad absurdum*. Thus a man who robs a post office at gunpoint may get ten years in jug. A woman who ends ten thousand lives in her clinics retires with the highest accolades of her profession, a hefty pension and submission to the Honours list.

Where the dislocation of justice from the divine is so stark then human justice becomes full of injustice - and it will be so wherever human sanction, deliberately and ostentatiously, departs from the Divine Law. In the long history of these islands the boundaries of our behaviours – and consequently our treasured freedoms – have been set by a common reference to our Judeo-Christian heritage and our allegiance to Christ Jesus, Our Lord. It is not luck or convenience that sees us ship up here in church of a Sabbath afternoon to give thanks to the Almighty and seek His blessing on our common enterprise.

If the Law is to become simply the victim of human opinion and the plaything of the strongest lobby group then none of us are safe. Lord Sumption, former Supreme Court judge and leading historian, was prescient in his recent and remarkable Reith Lectures when he warned of the danger of this Court unbalancing the fine constitutional settlement by arrogating to itself powers it has heretofore never pretended to possess. This, the Americanisation of the judiciary, inevitably leads to politicians packing the bench with partisans and party men so that Justice is no longer blind but seen, unashamedly, to be winking at her favourites. As the judiciary is neither elected nor representative such corrupting of the process is the short road to public contempt of the Law's authority and

becomes a fomenter of dissent – the growing divisiveness increasingly observable in our national life.

In the coming election and its unseemly cash bidding war for our attention and votes there is seen to be little mileage in troubling the pretty little heads of the electorate with constitutional debate - but such hidden engines defend us from civil strife and on good laws and godly governance do our liberties depend.

We, who have glimpsed this truth, have a duty to point continually to the fountainhead from whom all true sovereignty and justice flow. That is no less than the Lord Himself, God in Man made manifest, the dispenser of justice and mercy at the Final Judgement where all our interim judgements are at an end. On this great feast of Christ the King it is why we are here today *worshipping*. In this humility is Wisdom gained.

In the Catholic Church we have huge tomes of Canon Law for the governance of the Church. They are detailed and precise. In house they are jokingly referred to as ‘Everything Jesus would have told us if He’d had the time.’ At the very end it says this: ‘Notwithstanding the above – everything is subject to the Supreme Law of the Church – which is the Salvation of Souls.’

That, may I humbly suggest brothers and sisters, is the business of us all.