

A sermon preached at The Justice Service in Oakham Parish Church on Friday 27 October 2017 by The Very Rev'd Christopher Armstrong, Chaplain to The High Sheriff of Rutland, 2017 – 2018.

Venice.

We are in Venice, with the water lapping against those ancient palaces on the Grand Canal, the gondolas slowly rising and falling with the tide, the water instilling a strange calm over the city.

This is the location of our second reading this morning; the city which straddles the fault line between east and west, between Greek and Roman law, between Jew and Gentile..... where mercy seasons justice.

At the heart of this city – like so many cities – is a beautiful square where tourists take their ease and the coffee is astronomically expensive. But it is also the focus of this sermon, where St. Mark's Cathedral sits alongside and adjoins the Doge's Palace. Spiritual Authority and temporal justice sit alongside one another, feeding one another, giving a sense of harmony to the city.

Justice.

We are met today to give thanks to God for the administration of justice in these parts; to pray for those who execute it and to ask God's blessing on the work of The High Sheriff as he exercises hospitality towards Her Majesty's judges and – by his own example - encourages works of mercy to those in need.

Justice is one of Plato's Cardinal Virtues, by which we can become good citizens. These virtues point us to something greater than The Common Good, some greater goal than a human network which allows the greatest number of people to flourish. Shakespeare nods in this higher direction as he suggests that it is not cold human justice which is important but a greater goal where mercy also plays a part. Identifying this higher goal is hard work in our secular and multi-cultural society. It poses such grave problems that we are tempted to give up the search for that higher goal which is not just goodness but what religious people might term 'holiness'. So where might we find pointers to this form of Higher Justice?

As its name suggests, The Supreme Court may give us a clue. I was recently privileged to be party to a presentation of its work by Lord Neuberger, the former President of The Supreme Court. During discussion afterwards, the current Dean of St. Paul's asked why the judges went to church. The answer was instructive: 'Because we believe in a Higher Power', said the president.

The Holy Spirit.

Both Lord Neuberger and Shakespeare acknowledge that the power of God has something to do with the execution of justice and its striving for excellence. We experience God's influence today through the power of the Holy Spirit: the spirit which brings order out of watery chaos at the beginning of the Bible with its clearest expression to be found on the Day of Pentecost as it transforms Jesus' frightened

friends into bold apostles. It continues to work through us today as we strive for the greatest good.

This presence of God in the world takes many forms with a variety of names but it is St. John who coins the term *advocate* or *comforter*. His Greek word '*paraclete*' means, *called to stand around or alongside*.

That is exactly how most of us experience the exercise of justice today, whether it be employing a solicitor or standing in front of the judge. We expect that person to be an objective comforter – a friend to stand alongside us in our need. To play that part, to exercise a critical and dispassionate kindness, to bring order out of chaos – especially in relation to the Government's tortuous approach to Brexit – deserves all our admiration. Yours is an honourable power and so necessary in our culture but it is a fragile plant and needs protection and adequate resources.

However, the exercise of power in whatever form is fraught with difficult and so easily abused, both individually and structurally as The Church knows only too well. On this very day the abuse in the film industry is being unmasked but tomorrow..... will it be the Law?

The cost of legal action takes so many by surprise but for an increasing number it is prohibitive. In 'The Merchant of Venice', Portia delivers our second lesson and wins the case against Shylock for nothing – merely for the satisfaction of seeing justice done. Of course, no one will expect our massive system of Justice to run on nothing but we do have to question its existence if it cannot help the poorest in our society. With Legal Aid being cut, Judicial Review being pared down, the legal process is labouring on the one hand and on the other, it is being seem more and more as the property of the rich. As Shylock says – who speaks for all the marginalized –

*“If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us,
do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?”*

How then will the poor receive justice?

So, is the Spirit of God, the advocate, open to all, in or out of court? If mercy is not allowed to season justice, if the Doges Palace is disconnected from The Cathedral of St. Mark then the city will suffer. Surely it is the responsibility of both sides to ensure that does not happen. Amen.