

Legal Service 2016

think about these things (Philippians 4)

To the ... Lord Hubert de Burgh, Justiciar of England, his always and everywhere David, by divine permission Abbot of St Augustine's of Bristol, Greeting.

That is the beginning of a letter written in 1220, and written here. This cathedral church was then St Augustine's Abbey, and David had just been made its abbot. 1220, you might be a little vague about 1220, so here is a little history. England is divided and dangerous. King John has died, in 1216, in the midst of a Baron's War. His nine-year-old son, Henry III, has been crowned in Gloucester in haste. Note the fact that it was Gloucester. The West Country was loyal to the crown, and Bristol was especially so. This city was where you imprisoned pretenders to the throne. England is regional, one community set against another. By 1220 the royal party had actually won the Barons War, but they were losing the peace. The king was still a minor, the Earl Marshall (his regent) had died and there was no national government. Bristol was lawless, Abbot David's letter talked about people adding 'evil deeds to wicked ones'. Now, if a Dean gets really cross he can look at you over the top of his glasses, medieval abbots had more clout. Abbot David wrote to announce that he had put the keeper of Bristol Castle and the burgesses of the town under an interdict. No public services, no masses, no marriages, no baptisms in Bristol. They were allowed to hear sermons though; and that must have cheered them up no end.

David imposed the interdict because of

...those who demolish and destroy the laws of the kingdom in favour of their own laws

They destroy the laws of the kingdom in favour of their own laws. The law mattered. The law really mattered, being the people you are, you may not know about 1220, but you will know about 1215. That was the year King John was brought to Runymede and set his seal to Magna Carta. And Magna Carta was the defining moment in a story about what kind of people we are and about the place of law in the life of the land.

'to no one will we sell, to no one deny or delay right or justice'.

Magna Carta is not just a document it is a statement of intent, it is direction of travel, it describes and defines us, in Samuel Johnson's words 'it was born with a grey beard'. Magna Carta set its face against all that was arbitrary, personal, particular.

Eight hundred years ago that was what we were talking about in Bristol. This year, in this city, we have been telling the story again. That is because, according to a Kalendar drawn up by the town clerk, Robert Ricart, in 1479, Bristol got its first Mayor, in 1216. What that means is that we got our mayor in the midst of all this lawlessness. In that chaos we committed to this kind of order. The scholars will tell you that our mayoralty was born out of bloodshed, violence and competition. As one historian puts the powers of the mayor

'came from desperation'. We did not get laws and mayors and judges and high sheriffs because we are good, rational and wise. We got them because we are none of those things. We got them because we were weary of our divisions.

Remember Abbot David's complaint, they *destroy the laws of the kingdom in favour of their own laws*. That was what really grated with him. The fickle, partial, personal nature of justice, the lack of justice. That grates with all of us. Magna Carta put the king under the law, one law for all of us. As we got our mayor England was establishing the common law, determining its reach, justices in eyre, applying the same law. No more laws of our own. As Lord Bingham so memorably put it when he tried to explain what the rule of law really means,

if you maltreat a penguin in the London Zoo, you do not escape prosecution because you are Archbishop of Canterbury,

It is a more serious point than you might think, in 1156 Archdeacon Osbert was accused of murdering William Fitzherbert who was the Archbishop of York, and Osbert was never brought to justice owing, they said, 'to the subtlety of the laws and the canons'. Eight hundred years ago we set our face against that privilege, that exemption, that arcane complexity. One law, one city.

Law is not just a practice it is a fundamental assumption about community. Law assumes and determines that we should experience life in community. Law assumes we should be looked at whole, understood as more than competing claims and rights. Law assumes a life we hold in common, under common law, the life of a city and a nation.

We shall come back to the law, let's do the theology. The High Sheriff chose the reading that she read for us, Philippians 4,

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, ...if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things Philippians 4:8

This is a letter Paul wrote from prison. He is under pressure, choosing his words carefully. He is writing about the things that matter. He is also writing to a community that is divided, contentious and bad tempered. Chapter three is littered with warnings

Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers (3:2)

And chapter 4 opens, just before we heard the words that Helen read, with a curious bit of detail

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. (4:2)

These two women were leaders in the church community and they were fighting like cats. It is not cities that get divided and dangerous, churches do it too. And Paul is determined that the Christian community will not live like this. He looks for something else, something other, *stand firm in the Lord, my beloved* he says (Philippians 4:1). It is a demand, *stand firm in the Lord*. Don't fight, don't compete. That is what this letter says, it is a letter about community, morality and living together. Now Christians can be a bit sly with morality.

Too often Christians tell you to be good because God says you must be good. Too often we lay down the law and claimed an authority a power that cannot be checked or gainsaid. Don't argue with the Dean because the Dean has power of attorney for the Almighty. But Paul, notice, does not do that. *Stand firm in the Lord.* If you want to know what Christian living is, says Paul, look at Christ. *Stand firm in the Lord.* And then he says what we heard in our reading,

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, ...if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things

Look to Christ, stand firm in the Lord and then live like that yourselves. Look to your own lives, the lives you live together and commit to that experience. *Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just... think on these things.* Right at the heart of the Christian faith is looking to the life lived in Christ and living that life together. Think on these things. It is absolutely not an appeal to a mysterious higher power, a claim to know the will of God. It is a life we know and share. It is a common inheritance, a common experience, a life lived in common. That's the benchmark for Paul, not some mystical experience, nor a blind insistence on obedience to a distant deity, but a profound commitment to the life we can share in Christ. Think on these things. The life we hold in common, the one in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female. That is what he wants us to think about. *Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just... think on these things.*

Three years ago our annual conference had the deans of the Church of England assembling in Westminster. It is an odd business the deans' conference, deans are like the nose on your face, one is really quite enough. Thirty-six deans unsettle most people. Most people, but not everyone, the three Justices of the Supreme Court who graciously gave us their time, took us in their stride. We talked about law and faith. It was an interesting meeting and I was struck that the justices really went out of their way to tell us that Christian faith no longer has any bearing on the law. Christian assumptions can no longer offer any kind of map or compass to justice.

I have no real argument with that. But we will be the poorer if we stop talking to one another. This morning I want to suggest that when you bring together the legal profession and the church at a service like this there is a fundamental assumption that we *do* hold in common. We may get there differently but we have a shared reverence for a community in which all are equal. We believe that we can test our conviction by the quality of our common life. For you, if you are lawyers, it is a community in which all persons and all authorities are bound by the same law, publicly made and publicly administered. For me it is a conviction that there is a common life in Christ that is available to all, the same promise, the same hope, for all. We both believe, because we believe in law, and perhaps because we believe in God that we exist in relation to something else, and that other thing, the law, the work of God in Christ, secures a common status. We think on these things.

And that makes us unusual. And that makes us serious. The clamour now is that we are not the same and that the common life is not secure. Our faith in democracy is shaken, majorities begin to frighten some of us. Our national life is fractured, we are getting regional all over again, we are conscious of what divides north and south, rich and poor, privileged allures and the excluded. Worse than that, we have grown anxious, we have become suspicious. And our modern Caesars, of right and left, who want to build walls or

call people 'migrant' or just 'foreign' divide to rule they ask us to trust them and make their own laws It is leadership we lack they tell us. Mr Trump wants to be president so he can put Mrs Clinton in jail, you do not have to be her greatest admirer to find that sinister. Abbot David must lie unquiet in his grave and he lies quite near. It is private laws all over again.

Think on these things. We will be poorer if those of us who look to a common life under a common law do not together assert over and over again that public law publicly made will not give way to the trolls and bigots who sit in judgement at an anonymous screen. We will be poorer if we surrender the precious, redemptive conviction that it is a common hope we share, and a true commonwealth that we seek. Think about these things, the Epistle to the Philippians makes its appeal to,

whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure

It assumes we will know truth and honour and justice. Think on these things. It assumes we can name truth and honour and justice. And that is why what we do here today is worth doing.