

The Legal Service Bristol Cathedral 18th October 2015

It is an honour to return to Bristol after 25 years at the invitation of the Dean and the High Sheriff, and to the Cathedral where I was ordained deacon and priest. One of the last things I did before I left was to write a book about the problem of pain called 'Why do people suffer?' The only problem was that when the proofs arrived back from the printers they had left off the question mark so the title of the book ran 'Why do people suffer James Jones'!

One of the phrases that comes to mind when thinking about those who have responsibility to judge between different parties on contentious issues is 'the wisdom of Solomon'. He famously judged between two prostitutes who both claimed to be the mother of a certain child. His rather unorthodox proposal to cut the baby in two would today hardly qualify him today for Head of the Family Division! But it brought him great renown, and it is said that the people 'stood in awe of the King, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to execute justice'.

What is not so well known now is that as well as excelling in executing justice he was also famous as a poet. He composed thousands of proverbs and songs. And his subject? Nature. He wrote about the birds and the trees, about all sorts of animals and the fish of the sea – and people flocked to hear his wisdom.

Solomon was a living expression of the Psalm we sang (19) which begins with a paean of praise 'The Heavens are telling the Glory of God' and then goes on to sing the praises of God's Laws which are 'more to be desired than ...fine gold, sweeter than honey'.

This counterpointing of Creation and Commandment in the Psalm and in the Wisdom of Solomon tells us that both Nature and Law spring from the same Fountain.

This point came home to me recently when I attended the annual conference of the UK Environmental Lawyers. I was the after dinner speaker at the Gala Dinner held in the famous Lutyens Crypt of the Metropolitan Cathedral in Liverpool.

Being the Catholic Cathedral I told my audience how after Cardinal Hume had died my Chaplain got a call from a TV news company asking if they could interview me. He asked them what the interview was to be about. 'Oh, we'd like to know what he thinks his chances are of succeeding Cardinal Hume as Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster'!

I told my Chaplain we should have done the interview and seen how far we got before they twigged they had the wrong bishop! With me saying things like, "How very ecumenical of the Pope to choose an Anglican! How enlightened – no matter that I have a wife and three children...."

I sat through different sessions of the UKELA conference which was themed around water and learnt about all the legal opportunities that will arise in a range of environmental issues from fracking to Climate Change. The conference anticipated the warnings of Mark Carney, Governor of the Bank of England, just 10 days ago that Climate Change could destabilise the economy not least through the amount of legal action that could ensue.

But the point that has remained with me from the conference of environmental lawyers is that the Law is given not only to order relationships between people but also to govern the relationship between humanity and nature itself. It's a connection that Solomon in all his glory would have relished. It would have appealed both to his love of the Law and to his love of Nature. And if Mark Carney is right we will need a new generation of Solomons.

It is good to make such a point in this City of Bristol which has distinguished itself as the Green Capital of Europe, taking many environmental initiatives and showing other cities in the UK what can be achieved by the greening of the urban landscape. What's at stake in the end is the health of the people and in legal terms what could be called environmental justice.

I like the definition from an obscure 4th Century philosopher from North Africa called Lactantius. 'The whole point of justice', he wrote, 'consists precisely in providing for others through humanity what we provide for our own families through affection.' That I think is a pretty good definition of environmental justice.

Such a definition also sits well with Jesus' own teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Reflecting on the world of nature, the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, with which not even Solomon in all his glory could compare, Jesus concluded, 'Seek first the Kingdom of God and his justice and all these things shall be yours as well'. In other words, therein within a just world lies our own wealth and health.

Having served the two cities of Hull and Liverpool as bishop for some twenty years I've observed that it's often in areas of environmental degradation that poor health and criminality fester. Some argue that it's the cause, others that it's a consequence. Either way it's a feature of the criminal landscape.

Then in my time as Bishop to Prisons I spent many hours with offenders and saw programmes designed to restore and rehabilitate them. In a prison for women I saw how looking after an animal enabled a murderer, who had killed her own children and was pathologically incapable of relating to people, begin to develop an attachment and affection. In a male prison I saw how tending a garden through all the seasons brought sanity and purpose to dysfunctional men.

Connecting with nature has the power to transform. And not just offenders. From the poetry of John Clare to the writings of Richard Maby the natural world can be a hospital for the stressed and depressed.

That's why I'm delighted to know of the High Sheriff's decision to focus on the mental well-being of children and young people. We know that a high proportion of offenders in prison suffer from mental illness which often originates in childhood. Re-connecting us all and especially children with nature can have enormous therapeutic value and restorative effect.

I love the Graham Greene quote from his novel 'The Power and the Glory' when he writes.

"There's always a moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in".

That door has many panels within its frame. Nature is one of them.

There is, I believe, a deep moral and legal imperative to protect the relationship between humanity and nature. There are many forces at work in the world bent on driving us apart.

The Law has a unique role in binding us together. Lord Carnworth, President of the Environment Lawyers and member of the Supreme Court, has spoken of "the contrast between the relative simplicity of the basic objectives (of environmental law) and the complexity of the machinery by which we try to give them effect."

Gerard Manley Hopkins in a poem once lamented the felling and destruction of the Binsey Poplars which were to be used as blocks for the Great Western Railway.

"O if we but knew what we do

When we hack and rack the growing green."

But, in spite of this deforestation he was able to write in another poem called 'God's Grandeur' the optimistic line,

'And for all this, nature is never spent.'

But 150 years on there are many who think that on this very point the jury is now out.

May God grant to us all the Wisdom of Solomon.

The Right Reverend James Jones