

Service to Society ...

... encouraging, resourcing and enabling

A sermon given on the Second Sunday of Lent, 5th March 2023 – by the Chaplain to the High Sheriff and Priest in Charge of the Benefice of Waggoners, the Revd Jacki Tonkin at the East Riding of Yorkshire County Legal Service in Beverley Minster

Exodus 20:1-0; Romans 12:17-13:5

Good morning. I speak to you this morning, as I have the privilege to be chaplain to Jacky through her year as High Sheriff. And what a year it has been. A new sovereign, a new bishop, several prime ministers [*can't keep up, can you*] and one enormous task. But I also speak as Jacky's priest, as she and Andy are members of our church family in the Benefice of Waggoners. For those of you that don't know, we are six rural parishes in the Deanery of Harthill, and our deanery motto is Encourage, Resource and Enable. I think all of you who've watched Jacky over this year will see that that is effectively her motto too, for she truly is an encourager. Without her dedication and hope, much would not have been done. She seeks and finds resources for many projects. Just ask the business people here who have come alongside and sponsored and supported so many causes and projects. She is most persuasive. It has, in turn, enabled many to engage in the things that will go well beyond her year as High Sheriff - the White Ribbon Campaign that has developed and grown in our region this year is but one example; to see support uniting cities' football teams who are usually arch foes; to see the growing list of businesses, both large and small, signing up and taking this seriously; and then to see cubs and scouts so proud to be gaining their white ribbon badges speaks volumes. But so too do the less publicised and personal benefits to many in our community. Her efforts to encourage girls to achieve their goals and dreams, and others whose situations are challenging; the behind the scenes activities that only those who experience them are aware of - 'under the radar' if you will.

However, I come not to state all she has done this morning, but more to state how and why she has done it. Quite simply, it's because of her faith. Now, I know it's not fashionable to be a person of faith these days, especially if you might like to lead a political life. In our reading from Romans this morning it's fair to note that Christians were not held in high regard even then. If you know your history, you might recall that when Paul wrote that letter to the Romans, the Emperor was a man called Nero, whose reputation for persecution of people of faith is only surpassed by his reputation for fiddling as the city around him burnt. So faith is a challenge and always has been a challenge in society at

large. But for many, it's faith that sustains, encourages resources and enables them to do so much.

In this diocese of York, we are seeking to live Christ's story. We are encouraging all who can look beyond the popular misconceptions about Jesus and look for what he really stood for - faith, hope and love, abide these three, says Paul in another of his letters, and the greatest of these is love. 'Ah' you might be tempted to say, and so label me as another liberal 'do-gooder'. Well, I have to confess to being a social worker in the past in several London boroughs, if that helps build your image. But I have also lived and worked in Asia and been privileged to see what one human being can do to help and relieve the sufferings of the poor and the destitute and how the work of that one goes on and grows, and others join; what it means to live by a faith that holds others in need in high esteem and seeks justice for all. 'Pie in the sky' to some, but the rule of life to millions of others. We are taught that if we confess our sins and repent and God forgives us, all is well. On a simple level, yes, of course this is so. However, life as we know is never just simple. We teach our young that actions have consequences. And whilst we might be truly sorry for an action and wholeheartedly seek God and receive his forgiveness and indeed the forgiveness of others, that does not reduce the consequences of the action and the just results.

In the reading from the letter to the Romans today, justice plays a great part. And I know how much time Jacky has devoted to support and encourage those who seek to uphold justice in our society: the hours spent day and night on patrols with the police, both urban and rural; the fire service; the border force; the days seeing justice enacted in our courts and probation service; the tireless work with groups of young people; the encouragement given in visiting prisons where, despite the popular press saying otherwise, many actually do want to turn and enable their lives to improve. Did you notice this morning where our orders of service were printed? New skills enable new beginnings.

So to me, it is vital that we pray for and remember those in our society who uphold standards in public life and who live by some time honoured rules. Yes, the reading from the book of Exodus reminds us that there is nothing new under the sun. And depending on how you're spelling sun, it might enlighten you. You are those who seek to do best for our society, not for personal gain, but for human justice. To be an officer of the law in any role is an awesome high responsibility. Sadly, publicity that highlights the few who dishonour that calling so often tarnishes those who hold far higher standards. Accountability is essential, yes, but labelling the many as corrupt as the few is in no way just.

Romans teaches that the restraint and punishment of evil are essential and indeed are recognised as primary responsibilities of the State. We are told that the judge does not bear the sword of state for nothing. An awesome responsibility to temper justice with mercy, for mercy is God's love in action. A law enforcer, then, does have a high calling, and dare I say, just like those of us who wear a visible cross or a clerical collar or a symbol of other faiths, it also means that we are the target for some who seek to stir up emotions and condemn us, even when they don't really understand what we think and believe.

Perhaps there are some here this morning, listening to the two readings who thought, 'What on earth is that all about?' Words from the Old Testament, then words about obedience to the civil law. Words that over the centuries have been used by despots to justify their views and demand obedience. Taking verses out of context, be they from any source, is dangerous and damaging.

Those words from St Paul clearly say that private vengeance is wrong - a human desire so often - but fundamentally wrong. You see, God does care about justice and is concerned about evil. And if you want a discourse with me on the topic of evil, I will happily engage with you. But here and now, I simply say Ukraine, and the atrocities so evident there; and the denial of education to girls and women in Afghanistan to offer but two examples.

My faith tells me that God wants a society that does not, as Tom Wright has said, 'Collapse into chaos, where bullies and power brokers do what they like and get away with it.' Interestingly, even in dictatorships, murder is a crime - well usually, unless it's state sponsored. Human instinct is to want order in society - a society that encourages resources and enables this. I believe that encouraging early Christians to obey the civil rules, Paul was not seeking mindless disobedience to a tyrant's rule, but rather urging those who were already despised and held in little regard, not to make the situation worse by getting labelled as troublemakers. Why? Well, simply to be a Christian was then and is still now, in so many ways, to be countercultural. I've been accused of using religion as a crutch. Well, when something like a leg is broken, a crutch supports and enables healing. I've been told that we live time and time again in a post Christian society - sadly, many would say they do, and the Church must hold itself accountable for that. Happily, though, many do not.

But Paul urges the followers of Christ not to pick unnecessary quarrels, rather to focus on the revolutionary message of the gospel. If you've come here this morning under duress, or simply because it's the 'thing to do', then I hope I have not wasted your time. But if you have come to acknowledge and honour the work of all who uphold the law in our society

and to pray for them, that is great. Today, we do also want to honour one who has sought to encourage, resource and enable us all to see a brighter future. For many here in the East Riding. I hope my words may have enabled you to see that Jacky, formidable woman that she is, is supported not just by Andy and many good friends, but by her faith in the one who is both Light of the World and Prince of Peace. And if you want to know more about the revolutionary teachings, there are many here today who will tell you. But as one saint of old said, preach the gospel by any means and if necessary, use words. Look at Jackie's life, and if you didn't know her as a woman of faith, you do now - sorry, I've just outed you.

So, brothers and sisters, ladies and gentlemen, all of you - may God bless you in your service to our community. May you too encounter the one who truly encourages resources and enables you to change lives for the better.

Reading Text

Exodus 20:1-10

¹ Then God spoke all these words: ² I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;

³ you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴ You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me,

⁶ but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷ You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸ Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.

⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

¹⁰ But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

Romans 12:17-13:5

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. ^{13:1} Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. ² Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; ⁴ for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the

sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience.