

## **13 June 2010, St Alban's Abbey**

### **Preached in St Alban's Cathedral at a Service to Commemorate the 795<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sealing of Magna Carta**

**Readings: Deuteronomy 10.12-21; Matthew 5.17-20**

I used to be the Vicar of the Isle of Dogs, the loop in the River Thames opposite Greenwich, at the heart of London Docklands and of the credits for 'East Enders'. As Vicar, I had a 'minder' who had been the Kray brothers' driver, served ten years for a murder he said he hadn't done, and kept a protective eye on me and the church. In Lent we used the Ten Commandments as preparation for the Confession. The first time we did this, after the service my minder told me that he hadn't heard the commandments like that since he was a child, that he had broken nine and wasn't going to tell me which was the tenth.

In Christianity, as in Judaism, the Law provides a framework for our moral and religious life. This is not just a bottom line minimum of the standards that can be expected from everyone, and having an element of social control which if we fail to keep we can expect to be punished. Rather the Law embodies religious ideals and helps to set our vision and aspirations. The Law of God is what we love and in which we delight. Just think about that sublime setting of Stanford's of the opening of Psalm 119 sung by the choir: "Beati Quorum Via", "Blessed are they whose path is righteous, who walk in the law of the Lord".

There's not much that is unique in the moral teaching of Jesus. "Do to others as you would have them do to you" is universal wisdom. Confucius said the same. But there is plenty that is distinctive. "Love one another" of itself risks sounding like motherhood and apple pie running the dangers of platitude or sentimentality, but Jesus saying, "Love one another as I have loved you" invites the imitation of his self-giving sacrificial love undertaken as service in friendship. It is the pattern of God come among us, highlighting the life giving patterns of creation.

In relation to law Jesus stands in the traditions of Judaism but his distinctiveness is that he takes what was a minority reading interpreting the law. When a lawyer stood up to test him – I need to be careful in this company and at this service - about what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus replied, in effect, keep the commandments: Love God and love your neighbour as yourself. The arrogant lawyer wanting to justify himself – it's getting worse – asked, "Who is my neighbour?" And Jesus told one of the best known stories in the Gospels, the scandalous story of the Good Samaritan in which the person who was neighbour to the man who fell among thieves was not the priest or the Levite, religiously good men, but the Samaritan, the despised outsider. To make the point plain Jesus asked the lawyer, "Which of the three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? So much were the Samaritans despised that the lawyer was unable even to say his name. "The one who showed mercy", he said; to which Jesus replied, "Go and do likewise."

Our neighbour is not just our own kind, kindred, tribe. Jesus universalised the implications of the commandments in keeping with the Deuteronomic law we heard read, that like God we should love the stranger.

The writer Bill Bryson once sent me a cheque for St Martin's work with homeless people. His note said he sent it because, "If I fall on hard times, I want to be sure of a welcome." It's universal wisdom in our own interests extending our understanding about to whom we should

do good in the hope that they will do the same for us when we are in need. Remember, “For you were strangers in the land of Egypt”. It could happen to any of us.

Out of this Biblical tradition has arisen a tradition of law in this country of which the Church and Synagogue should be proud. The short passages read in this service from Magna Carta and from the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights are resonant with the scriptures. They have an independence, of course, as is the nature of what is universal, but their concern with justice is the concern of God. “For the Lord your God... is not partial and takes no bribe... executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and ...loves the stranger providing them with food and clothing.” (Dt 10.17,18). Law protects the vulnerable.

St Martin-in-the-Fields is the Royal Parish Church and when it was built in 1725 the King was the Churchwarden. In the ceiling at the head of the nave facing the congregation is a very prominent and very grand royal coat of arms. In keeping with law it was put there to remind us to pray for the monarch and it makes a very clear statement about who is on top. Beyond it in the sanctuary above the altar, in a glorious burst of gold, is the unpronounceable Hebrew name of God. Even the monarch rules under God. It is a very important principle, not lost on Archbishop Stephen Langton when getting King John to seal Magna Carta with its opening that, “The English Church shall be free and shall have its rights intact and its liberties unfringed upon”.

Church guards its duty to a higher authority carefully and rightly. We all sit under the judgement of God. What this religious freedom was not intended to do was to provide ecclesiastical exemption for legal and moral standards below those of the rest of the State. That the Church of England today continues to seek exemption from employment and equality legislation is a disgrace. It purports to protect religious freedom and the conscience of individuals whilst providing cover for shoddy employment practice and discrimination. Ironically what we seek exempt from is the legal and human rights tradition of which we should be so proud to have helped form.

There seems to me a curious conclusion to this sermon. In the twentieth century it seemed to many as though the world would become more and more secular and that religion would soon die out. Already in the twenty-first century that looks wrong. To be human is to be religious. The wonder, mystery and beauty of creation brings us to worship, repentance and new life. In our world we are bedevilled by bad religion and uncertain about what criteria we might use to identify good religion, but what is clear is that religion is far too important to be left to the Church and religious institutions on their own. The State has a duty to hold the Church to account for the bottom line standards of law which can be expected of every member of the State. It will not do for the Church to seek exemption on the grounds of gender or sexual orientation. The Church needs not to be treated as a special case but to be held to account. For as King John was forced to recognise by the Church and Barons working together, we all sit equally under the judgement of God.