

A Sermon preached by the Bishop of Coventry (the Rt Revd Dr Christopher Cocksworth) on the occasion of The High Sheriff of Warwickshire's Legal Service at St Mary Warwick on 14th October 2013.

Readings: Ecclesiasticus 4.20-28; Hebrews 11.1-3, 32-12.2

Introduction

Never speak against the truth,
but be ashamed of your ignorance.
Do not subject yourself to a fool,
or show partiality to a ruler.
Fight to the death for truth,
and the Lord God will fight for you.

Never speak against the truth

An unsustainable State

I am reading a book at the moment about the Stasi in the GDR – the country we used to call East Germany.

The Stasi were the secret police of the Communist State.

The Stasi were all-pervasive. In Stalin's Soviet Union there was one KGB agent for every 5830 people. In the GDR there was one Stasi agent or informant for every 63 people. If you add in part-time informants the ratio was as high as one agent or informer for every 6.5 citizens.

The Stasi were obsessed with information, especially about any information that might indicate a threat to the State. But their obsession with information went hand in hand with an obfuscation of the truth. In fact they did more than obscure truth. They overrode it. Contrary to the command of our reading, they spoke against the truth.

Anna Funder, who researched the book, records an interview that she had with Karl-Eduard von Schnitzler, a prominent broadcaster on behalf of the regime. 'He can switch', she says, 'from one view to another with frightening ease. I think it is a sign the truth does not matter because you cannot be contradicted'.

The Stasi's manipulation of the truth infiltrated and influenced every level of society – including the judiciary. Even the legal system and its judiciary found themselves dancing to the Stasi's tune – even following their sentencing instructions given before the trial had taken place.

As we know, it was a State that did not last. It survived less than 45 years. A State and a society that tries to set itself up against truth and then to enact that distortion in its legal system is unsustainable.

A State that abides

A couple of weeks ago I was in Salisbury. I visited the Chapter House of the Cathedral and saw the Magna Carta – one of the original versions of the document signed in 1215 that Lord Denning described in our time as ‘the greatest constitutional document of all times – the foundation of the freedom of the individual against the arbitrary authority of the despot’.

I have a particular interest in the Magna Carta because the Bishop of Coventry is named as one of the reverend Fathers who advised the King on its content. And a jolly good job my esteemed predecessor did because without it your vehicles would be in danger of being commandeered by the High Sheriff:

No sheriff, royal official, or other person shall take horses or carts for transport from any free man, without his consent.

In fact, everyone here gets some sort of mention in the Magna Carta. You’ll be glad to know that it restrains the Lord Lieutenant, for:

Neither we nor *any royal official* will take wood for our castle, or for any other purpose, without the consent of the owner.

And Vicar you can rest easy that the Chief Constable won’t be walking our with the candle sticks thanks to the Magna Carta:

No constable shall take corn or other movable goods from any man without immediate payment, unless the seller voluntarily offers postponement of this.

And we all rely on the Magna Carta when it comes to our holidays abroad:

In future it shall be lawful for any man to leave and return to our kingdom unharmed and without fear, by land or water.

I hope it’s been updated to include air travel!

More seriously, and relevantly to today, the Magna Carta pledges that:

We will appoint as justices, constables, sheriffs, or other officials, only men [and thankfully now women, of course] that know the law of the realm and are minded to keep it well.

During my stay in Salisbury I also went up the Tower of the Cathedral to the base of the magnificent Spire.

It was extraordinary to see the careful structural work that held the mighty vaulted ceiling in place, and the great timbers that supported the roof with its tons of lead, and then the complex weaving of wood and iron that held the Tower in place and supported the Spire as it reached for the sky.

Much of the structure was as it had been originally designed and installed in the C13 a few years after the Magna Carta was signed. But some of it has been adapted and added to over the years as new technology allowed the same purpose to be better supported.

I couldn't help wondering – will my own Cathedral (built just 50 years ago) be looking as good when it's 750 years old.

The great C13 Century Cathedral with its magnificent Tower and Spire built with expert craftsmanship – each timber individually chosen for its size and shape - still stands today. The principles of the Magna Carta – and even some of its actual clauses – remains the foundation of British Society.

We have lived under its majestic words for two years short of 800:

No free man shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions, or outlawed or exiled, or deprived of his standing in any other way, nor will we proceed with force against him, or send others to do so, *except by the lawful judgement of his equals or by the law of the land.*

The heart of the Magna Carta, and the nation which it has undergirded, has stood the test of time because it accords with truth, the truth that is enacted through true justice.

A State that abides under God

The Spire of Salisbury Cathedral reaches up not to sky but to the heavens. It is there to point beyond itself, to something higher – it is there to reach and point to God.

Like many here I was privileged to attend the Opening of the Leamington Justice Centre by HM The Queen. I was very moved to see part of our unwritten constitution arrayed in front of us in one of the Courts. The Queen was seated directly in front of her Royal Crest at the centre of the Judges' Bench flanked by High Court Judges. In his remarks before The Queen, the Lord Chief Justice drew our attention to the fact that the Judges are Her Majesty's Judges. They do not serve the Government – they serve The Queen and the Queen embodies the nation.

My place – and I rather enjoyed this – was in the witness box, and my work on the day was to pray God's blessing upon all that would take place in that court and that Centre over the years.

The role of the Church in thirteenth century England is the same as the role of the Church in today's society – a role that is shared with all the Churches of this Land and other Faith Communities – to witness to the God of which our Queen is a faithful servant, and under whom our nation seeks to live. It is a witness that stretches back to Magna Carta and beyond it: that everything is subject to the just and gentle rule of God.

In our anthem we have just been reminded of our Zadok the Priest and Nathan the Prophet anointed King Solomon and how all the people cried out: 'Long live the King'. I believe that our own Queen is the only reigning Monarch to have been anointed in this way with oil. Anointed with oil so that she may be blessed, sanctified and consecrated as Queen and – in the words of the prayer used in 1953 by the Archbishop thereby:

Strengthened with the Holy Ghost the Comforter;
Confirmed and stablished
with God's free and princely Spirit,
the Spirit of wisdom and government,
the Spirit of counsel and ghostly strength,
the Spirit of knowledge and true godliness,
and filled with the Spirit of God's holy fear,
now and for ever.

Christian Faith is the established witness in British Society to the truth of God that has been fully revealed and lived out in human life in the person of Jesus Christ. 'Looking only to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith', says our second reading.

Religious Faith of every authentic sort calls every level of our society to humility before the truth of God, and to fight for truth when truth is threatened.

For only when truth - and the justice and the impartiality that goes with it – is upheld that human beings are free to reach for the dignity for which God created us. It is the high task of the legal system – and the sacred calling of its officers – (in the ancient words of Jewish Faith) *never to speak against the truth, and never to show partiality and always to beware of evil.*

And so may God:

Strengthen you with the Holy Ghost the Comforter;
Confirm and stablish you with God's free and princely Spirit,
the Spirit of wisdom and government,
the Spirit of counsel and ghostly strength,
the Spirit of knowledge and true godliness,
and filled with the Spirit of God's holy fear,
now and for ever
through Jesus Christ our Lord.