

A Sermon preached by the Bishop of Coventry,
the Rt Revd Dr Christopher Cocksworth,
on 2nd October 2017
in The Collegiate Church of Saint Mary, Warwick
on the occasion of The High Sheriff's Legal Service
in Thanksgiving for The Queen's Peace and our Heritage

Readings: Joshua 1.1-9
Matthew 20.17-28

Introduction

Our two readings concern journeys. In the first, Joshua – whose name means *God saves* – and the people of Israel are about to embark on a momentous journey that will take them across the river Jordan into the Promised Land. There a whole new future opened up for them, and the vast vista of a new land in which they could live panned out before their eyes. Like some of you, perhaps, I have stood in that same spot and seen that breathtaking sight.

In our second reading, Jesus – essentially the same name as Joshua, therefore also meaning *God saves* – and his disciples have set out on a journey to Jerusalem where a new future awaits them. Jesus' whole ministry had been building up to his arrival in Jerusalem, so there was much excitement. Even today the old city of Jerusalem is a fantastically exciting place to enter, as anyone will know who has ascended its hill. It was widely expected that Jesus would, in some remarkable way, establish the kingdom which he had spent the last three years talking about, and that he would be proclaimed as its king.

'Not so with you . . .'

We heard at the beginning of the reading how Jesus warned his disciples that things would not go quite as they expected in Jerusalem – that he would endure a sham trial, illegal beating and death by the cruel devices of the Gentiles. But that was not enough to deter the mother of James and John. Perhaps she hadn't heard what Jesus had said to her sons. Perhaps she had not been listening those past three years to what he was saying about the sort kingdom – the form of society and way of living – that he was bringing.

She knelt at his feet – like one does with a great king – and asked for a favour: "Let my two sons have the best places in your kingdom – one on your right,

one on your left, so that they can rule with you . . . and have the very best perks!”

And what parent can blame her? We’ve all been there. Two weeks ago, my wife and I were taking our youngest son to University, installing him in his student accommodation. He was leaving home, and we were trying to let him go with dignity into his new life. But it was difficult. I turned out to be just like the mother of James and John: “Let’s get into the kitchen I said” (thinking to myself, “before anyone else”).

There we found a squeaky clean kitchen shared between two flats, full of empty cupboards. “Quick”, I said, “we haven’t got long . . . choose the best cupboard. You want one at the top and one at the bottom”. Then I saw the bank of fridges and freezers. Gone was the one weight height fridge (with the cramped freezer compartment) shared between a whole flat of my day. Here were three head height fridges and three head freezers. All empty! There was no time to waste. “Occupy your favourite shelves”, I commanded.

“Chill, dad”, he told me. “There’s plenty to go around. We’ll sort it between us”. So I could see his mind working: “I think it’s time I need to get him out of here before any of my new flat mates come in”. Of course, he managed it. John and James were not so efficient. The other ten disciples caught some of the conversation between Jesus and the mother of James of John, and they got pretty cross with their colleagues, because, of course, they also wanted the best seats and the most prestigious roles in Jesus’ kingdom.

Then Jesus came in on the conversation:

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. *It will not be so among you*; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.”

Not so among you, these are, I think, are some of the most significant and distinctive words that Jesus says, and they sum up lots of other things he said. *Not so among you* – in this kingdom that I am bringing, this form of society, this way of living together, it will be different.

The rule of law

Distinctive as they are, these are not words that came from nowhere. *Not so among you* was very much what the Lord God was saying to Joshua on the threshold of the Promised Land.

Be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn to the right hand or to the left.

The people of Israel were being given the gift of a new land so that they could create a society under the rule of law; God's law, a law of justice and mercy in which even the orphan, the widow and the stranger were treated fairly and provided for; law that was flouted in the killing of Jesus.

It is a terrifying thing to live without the rule of law. In the international pages of one Saturday newspaper a few stories caught my eye. The first was about the Tora Bora caves, from where Osama Bin Laden once operated to the area east of Kabul, between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The writer described these as the "lawless highland border regions that sit astride the Pakistani border", where ISIS are now battling the Taliban for control. The second was about the sharp rise in recent years of the murder rate in Baltimore, Los Angeles and some other American cities, and our hearts go out this morning to those who suffered in a terrible gun attack at a concert in Las Vegas yesterday night. The writer of that article quoted a recent study of those cities, which said, "Wherever human beings are forced to deal with each other under conditions of weak legal authority, the monster lurks".

That monster lurks in every society, even our own, not least because it lurks deep, often hidden, but there nonetheless, in every human heart. That is why the rule of law – the work of the judiciary, the criminal justice system, the police force, the civil courts – are of great service to humanity and, in Christian thought, are said to serve the purposes of God.

The cover of our Order of Service reminds us of the great purpose of the law, and the reason for our gathering today: "To preserve The Queen's Peace". The law is to serve the peace of the land and the peace of the world. Our law draws deeply on the ancient Hebrew concept of peace – a concept that lay at the heart of Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of God – of *shalom*. *Shalom* is not just the absence of war and conflict, but the establishment of a just and good society, where people are truly free.

That which constitutes this peace, that *shalom*, needs constant attention to ensure that the law serves the people. This is the sort of issue the people of Catalonia and Spain are facing over the legality of yesterday's referendum, and whether there is a higher law of service to all its people which the national government is neglecting.

More than law

We gather at this point in the legal year to give thank for the rule of law and for those who exercise its responsibilities. We gather to remind each other of the function of law to serve humanity, and to pledge ourselves constantly to check that the law – and those who frame it – truly and fairly serves humanity.

However, we also come together to recognize that the law in itself is not sufficient. The successful rule of law requires a civic community of committed public servants, who will go beyond the strict requirements of the law, always reaching out for the highest law of God's purposes: God's *shalom*, God's reign of justice, mercy and love.

We come to hear Jesus' reinterpretation of greatness as serving others, and his re-ordering of how to be first among people by being a slave to others. We come to be inspired by his own example, as the "the Son of man who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many".

As we come seeking strength and support for our own responsibilities, praying that we will be renewed in our aspirations and capacities to serve others, we can be sure that Jesus Christ offers us not only his example, but also the promise of his living presence to walk alongside us, even to be within us, as we make our journeys to whatever lies ahead.

"Be strong and courageous", as his namesake Joshua said to people who were called to live within the highest demands of God's law, "do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go".