

Address by Canon Leigh Richardson, Sub-Dean, at the Mayor's Civic Service at the Cathedral, 17.6.2018. Acts 23.12-35

Could I take this opportunity to echo the Dean's welcome to you all at the beginning of the service, it is good to have you all here today in support of Cllr Michael Chant's year in the office of Mayor of this incredibly special city of St. Davids. I must admit, I do feel slightly odd being up here in the pulpit, 6ft above contradiction, speaking to the civic dignitaries of the area. As a local lad having grown up here in St. Davids in the 70s and 80s, if you'd have told me then that I'd be stood here, doing this, in this place in 2018, I'd have probably laughed at you – and I think the very same thought might be going through the Mayor's head too – although he's much, much older than me – and became far more respectable and responsible than I'll ever be! But having talked with Mike, there is a sense of the timing being right, of coming full circle and here we are, in this place which was both our playground and our tutor, at a time of great transition and opportunity for the city and cathedral to renew its relationship and to forge some really strong links as we move forward.

But for some people, this civic/ religious interface seems to jar them, and they feel uncomfortable – that its archaic, that we're doing something that, yes has gone on for centuries, but is meaningless in today's secular culture – so are we doing this out of tradition, because its nice to dress up and mark the occasion with some pomp and ceremony or because we really believe that framing what we do as city and town councillors and elected representatives within a religious and ethical context actually matters to how we do business.

There are some great examples of this both from scripture and from history – our new testament reading this morning from Acts shows how the civic and military authorities were involved in protecting St. Paul from the wrath of the Jews, in a reading which sounded like something from an action movie, Paul's nephew discovers a plot to lynch him when he's being transferred from the barracks to the Sanhedrin, and so the civic authorities step in to protect him and set in motion an armed convoy of 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen and 200 hundred spearmen, horses for Paul and not going to the Sanhedrin, but leaving for Capernaum, all under the cover of darkness and to be taken into the safety of Governor Felix's protection there.

Paul is using his status as a Roman citizen to protect him, but he's also a known religious maverick – he talks openly about how Jesus changed him, from a man who hunted down Christians as part of an organised persecution 'breathing murderous threats', to promoting Christianity and ultimately being a 'prisoner for Christ' – and in this wonderful protection, even when he's in prison, he continues to write letters to encourage other Christians – the protection provided by civic authorities gives him this space, for a time at least.

We're living in very exciting times on the peninsular, not least with the imminent launch of Ysgol Penrhyn Dewi and the enormous opportunities we have as a city and as a religious community to foster and encourage this faith school, the first and only 3-16 Church in Wales

through school in Wales. During a recent meeting we were reminiscing about the old Ysgol Dewi Sant House Names, and it seemed that entire families managed to stay in the same house for their entire secondary school life – a bit like the Weasleys and Gryffendor, it seemed that my family, the Richardsons were all in Gerallt at various points in history, and we would all look with suspicion at those from Dewi or Asser, especially during the Eisteddfod and at the annual inter-house sports. I knew who Gerallt was named after, Geraldus Cambrensis, Gerald of Wales, and of course Dewi, but I didn't know much about Asser. To my embarrassment, I found out that Asser was a monk here in the late 800s and possibly bishop here and he was recruited by King Alfred to his court when Alfred was assembling his scholarly court, and so Asser's time was split between St. Davids and Alfred's court at Winchester – and done so with the support and permission of the religious community here at St. Davids because this provided protection for the monastery from the local chieftan, King Hyfaidd who often attacked the church and abused the monks here.

Asser's religious conviction, his ethics and his learning were useful to Alfred who was a scholarly and Godly man and in exchange for that the monastery here received protection – Paul in standing up for what was right, was given protection by the Romans, and all of us here this morning, whether we are in robes or not, have dual responsibilities – we are called, as representatives in our communities, to both to stand up for what is right, and to provide a safe place for that to happen.

We each of us have the responsibility to maintain our integrity, whether as Christians or Muslims or Hindus, or as Councillors – we are who we are, and as well as being who we are, we uphold the law and submit to the authorities – this doesn't mean that we roll over, but it does mean that we show some respect for the office. Towns and city councils have an enormous amount of devolved power now, and often internal bickering and resentment can block good things from happening – Christians are called to be salt and light in our communities, so far from the backstabbing and revenge plotting which we see so much of in modern politics. Paul in his first letter to Timothy, Chapter 2 verses 1-3 says this:

"I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone - for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good and please God our Saviour."

So if you are tempted to moan about the government or your town or city council, can I suggest that you pray for them instead. It will do far more good than venting your rage on Facebook or Twitter! So we are to intercede for those in government, and give thanks to God for them. Even though we may not agree with them about everything. We thank God for what we agree with. And we pray for what we do not. And this cathedral community will pray for you, for all of you, as we regularly do here at least once a week.

But you may ask why we should we pray for those who have been elected to represent us?

Well, firstly, partly because that's part of the deal – just like Paul and Asser, we have our own flavour of Christianity and we're not ashamed to pray for you – and secondly, because we are asked to. It's as simple as that. God in his wisdom has put this created order into

play and we should pray for his agents. When we see the world in turmoil and countries sabre rattling with nuclear weapons – there is not much we can do, but as Christians we can pray – pray that the God of all creation will put an end to warring and violence – and in that end game, there will be righteous justice, what is good will be rewarded and what is wrong will be punished - God wants the best for us.

So what if we believe that those elected to serve us have done wrong – I'm thinking here of perhaps more than if they supported the Brexit vote or not.... –

The noted 18th.c. American Congregational minister Jonathan Mayhew who ministered at Old West Church, Boston, Massachusetts. He was the one who coined the phrase "No taxation without representation." (and you know how that ended!) He said, "Rulers have no authority of God to do mischief."

We have already touched upon the need to pray, and to try and influence as salt and light in our communities by voting, and lobbying. There are Scriptural instances of governing authorities doing wrong and God's people disobeying their orders.

In Acts 5 the apostles were brought before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious leaders, who had imprisoned them and ordered them not to preach the gospel. The apostles continued to disobey this and, in verse St Peter declared that "We must obey God, rather than men."

There are times, and I'm guessing with the world as topsy turvy as it is at the moment, there will be times again when we will need the moral courage of our office to stand up against injustice and be counted as the men and women of integrity that we are. Whilst its good to remember the history of the office that we bear – its also important that in this instance and in today's world, our blue and red robes, and our chains of office – don't count for much outside of ceremonial and tradition. It's who we are that's important, and how our hearts are set, with a strong belief in a cause, and those of us with a strong Christian faith, how that informs what we say and what we do.

If we can remember that as we go about our ministrations then just maybe, we might usher in a different world with a different emphasis - one of compassion, righteousness and love.