

**Sermon by the Dean, the Very Revd Dr Sarah Rowland Jones  
at the Admission of Arwel Davies as Diocesan Registrar –  
Derbyniad Arwel Davies i Gofrestrydd Esgobaeth Tyddewi  
24 March 2019**

Ps 85, Gen 3:8-15; Gal 4:1-5 – The Eve of the Annunciation

Take these words and speak through them, take our minds and speak to them, take our hearts and set them on fire with your love. Amen.

The two readings this evening are for the eve of the Annunciation: the Church's celebration of the Angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she has been chosen to bear the long-awaited Messiah, Jesus, the one who saves. And she responds, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord: let it be to me according to your word' – according to God's good will and good purposes.

You also are saying a yes to God's good will and purposes today, Arwel, but we might well ask what the Annunciation otherwise has to do with the legalities of C21<sup>st</sup> Welsh Anglicanism? Well, we could have done a lot worse than this feast and these readings. Indeed, you could say the whole story is about the breaking of the law, the consequences that follow, and the remedies of restorative grace through the justice of the cross.

But let's start with the Annunciation: I'm rather fond of Gabriel. Despite being an archangel, he's the patron saint of all who are messengers of Good News: clergy, diplomats and broadcasters, even postal workers – I commend him!

But it is not just about announcing any old good news. This is a very specific good news is all about the fulfilment of promises: we have a God who keeps his word, who discharges his undertakings - the sort of reliability that warms a Diocesan Registrar's heart!

As St Paul writes to the Galatians: 'when the fullness of time had come, God send his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as God's children.' It is the fulfilment of the prediction in Genesis, where God tells the serpent 'you will strike at the heel of the woman's offspring – but he will strike your head.'

Talking of snakes ... well, I did some googling of humorous definitions of what is a lawyer, and almost all of them are unrepeatable. But this caught my eye: why do snakes never bite lawyers? Out of professional courtesy! Well, Arwel, we do want you to be a snake on behalf of the Bishop: but only to be as wise as a serpent, while remaining as innocent as a dove, as Jesus said of all his followers (Mt 10:16)

When it comes to interpreting the rules and regulations of the church, we trust you will not be like the serpent of Genesis 3, who lured Eve and Adam into its trap by playing with the letter of the law in order to distort its intended spirit. Had we read the verses preceding this evening's passage, we'd have heard those subtly seductive words 'Did God say...?' As has been said, the snake was too clever for his own good, and was left without a leg to stand on.

So what then is the role of law in redemption? It is a negative or a positive? Are lawyers as bad as google paints? Perhaps the problem lies with us, when we see law as constraining and diminishing our capacity for freedom; when we live as if all that matters is the 11<sup>th</sup> commandment of 'thou shall't not get caught out', as if the best of life lies in maximising what we can twist the law to let us get away with.

But the purpose of good law is to guide us into the ways that lead to life. If anyone has any doubts, just turn to Psalm 119 – all 176 verses of it, meditating on the goodness that comes from following the laws, precepts, statutes, ordinances, teachings and word of the Lord. So, for example we have:

Blessèd are those that are blameless in their lives and walk in the law of the Lord, v.1

I will walk at liberty: for I have sought thy precepts, v.45

I will never forget thy precepts; for by them thou has given me life, v.93

Blessing, freedom and life – this is what the law brings as a good servant. But it can also be a bad master: the law which brings condemnation to those who find themselves entrapped by it, when they put their reliance on narrowly interpreted religious observances – the works of the law – rather than in its life-giving spirit. And indeed, all of us sin and fall short of the law, and hence 'Jesus is born ... under the law, to redeem those under the law.'

To get to grips with how the law can both give life, and condemn, read St Paul's letter to the Romans, especially Chapter 3. Here he writes that 'We are justified not by works of the law, but by grace as God's gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus', (Rom 3:24), yet adds 'Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law' (Rom 3:31).

So then, Arwel, as Diocesan Registrar, your task is to uphold the law, as the truth that sets us free, not with the mercy of cheap grace, but with the good news of the gospel, of costly, redemptive love at work through incarnation and cross.

Even the secular world, in criminal justice systems around the globe, have recognised the need for gospel-shaped solutions, as they increasingly turn to Restorative Justice. This is a Justice of redemption and hope, that does not merely attempt to restore the status quo before laws were breached. Rather, it attempts to bring both perpetrators and victims, together with the wider community and context, to a better place where all may pursue a more healthy and wholesome future

Indeed, we find such dynamics at work in this evening's Psalm. So may its verses be our prayer for you this evening. We ask God do show us his mercy, and grant us his salvation (v.7) in and through all you are and in all you do for the Church in this Diocese. May God's mercy and truth meet together in this new ministry, Arwel, and may your work enable righteousness and peace to embrace each other (v.10). May truth flourish throughout the land of this diocese, and may it be met by the righteousness of heaven (v.11). May the Lord make you a means through which he grants us his prosperity, so we may flourish and increase (v.12), bearing fruit that lasts, fruit of eternal significance. Through your work, Arwel, may righteousness lead all of us who are part of this diocese, and those we serve, so we may walk in the ways of peace.

Glory indeed be to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen