

**HOMILY ON THE OCCASION OF THE RED MASS
TO MARK THE OPENING OF THE LEGAL YEAR**

**Delivered by Most Rev Mark Coleridge
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Years ago when I was first in Rome as a student, I was greatly impressed that the Italian Ministry of Justice was then called the Ministry of Grace and Justice. This struck me as a profoundly biblical and Catholic understanding of the law. Not only justice but *grace*; and grace came first. I was also impressed by the fact that every court-room in Italy had in it a crucifix as the great emblem of grace. In the meantime, “Grace” has been dropped from the Ministry’s name and in recent times there has been a move in Italy to have the crucifix removed from the court-rooms. Something has been lost with the demise of the word and the loss would be still greater if the crucifixes were taken down.

By celebrating Mass here this morning, we set the word “grace” and the sign of the Cross over the legal year that lies ahead. Most in the legal profession, I imagine, mark the opening of the legal year. Yet not all mark it in quite this way. We gather in a cathedral, and we gather for Mass – we gather, that is, to celebrate the sacrifice of Christ which sets the courts in the shadow of Calvary, which is a radical thing to do, however traditional and conventional this celebration may seem. The red that gives the Mass its name is certainly a sign of the Holy Spirit as the biblical readings have made

clear. But it is also a sign of blood – the blood shed by Christ on the Cross to reveal the absolute justice of God.

In some ways, biblical Law and common law, cathedral and courtroom, seem miles apart. Yet what we do here this morning suggests that they may not be as far apart as they seem. This is hardly surprising, given that the world in which common law emerged and evolved was a world shaped in many ways by Scripture, even if now we inhabit a culture which, to its great impoverishment, has taken leave of the Bible.

The common law that you administer is often seen as a necessary evil. No-one – apart from lawyers – likes going to court; but courts are necessary in order to restrain wayward human passions and to protect fragile human rights. The law may be an ass, but it is an ass that bears a heavy and important burden if society is not to descend into chaos.

For the Bible, however, the Law – with a capital L, the Torah – is neither ass nor necessary evil. It is God’s greatest gift to the people he has made his own. God’s eye fell upon a rag-tag mob of runaway slaves, and he chose to set them in the world as a counter-society of slaves set free – the logic of God to contradict the logic of Pharaoh, “once a slave always a slave”. The Law given to this people on Sinai embodied their God-given identity, and it set before them a royal road of Exodus which nothing and no-one could take away.

The Exodus was the great liberating act of God, but the question was always: How in our own time and place can we come forth from the Egypt

in which we find ourselves oppressed? The Exodus was marvellous but it was long ago: what of us here and now? The brilliantly original answer to which the Bible comes is this: obey the Law God has given and you will know true freedom. This is a vision of liberating obedience; and that paradox lies at the heart of biblical religion, as it lies at the heart of the Cross of Jesus who was obedient unto death (cf Phil 2:8).

According to Scripture, the human being was created not for slavery but for freedom; and biblical Law is all about defence of that freedom in a world where it is always threatened. For the Bible, it is a freedom which depends not upon the human exercise of power – be it political, ideological or financial. It is a freedom which depends upon a more than human power. That is the transcendent horizon of all law, in defence of which Thomas More shed his blood. There has to be more to the law than the ruler's will to power. If there is not, then we are caught up in a brutal power-struggle in which the legal process serves the interests of the strong and casts the weak aside. It is precisely this abuse of the legal process against which the biblical prophets rail consistently – the use of the law by the powerful to promote their own interests at any cost.

The Bible does not doubt that we need laws – the prescriptions and penalties of a legal code. But that is not enough, because laws need to be interpreted and administered in a way that looks to justice. For Scripture, justice involves more than what transpires in the law-courts. Justice looks further to a world of right relationship, not only between human beings but also between the human being and God. The Bible sees right relationship with God and right relationship between human beings as strictly correlated:

if you get one wrong, then you get the other wrong. In a culture like ours which often gets the relationship with God wrong, it is hardly surprising, as Scripture sees it, that we so often get relationships between human beings badly wrong, as you know only too well.

But law and justice look to a further horizon still: they look to mercy. This is a delicate point when addressing those like you who are charged with the administration of the law. The world in which you are immersed from day to day is the world of crime and punishment. But the Mass we celebrate says that the administration of justice finds its proper place within the larger context of mercy. For this community, and for you in particular, the challenge is to find the point where law, justice and mercy meet in a way that respects both the needs of society and the dignity of the human being.

The mercy of God knows of crime and punishment, but it looks beyond to see more. Within the logic of crime and punishment, the penalty must fit the offence. Often enough, this is a culture which identifies the offender wholly with the offence. There is, it seems, nothing more to the offender than the offence, and the punishment must match that perception. Mercy, however, looks at the offender, sees the offence as it really is, but sees more. It sees that there is more to the offender than the offence. This is to see as God sees. The God of mercy sees the truth of each of us in ways beyond imagining. He sees our sin, but he sees more. He knows that we are more than our offence, and he loves the more that he sees. In looking at the human being, what God sees in the end is the face of his Son. However disfigured it may be on Calvary, it is still the face of the beloved Son that God sees; and here at this altar we too look on the One whom we have

pierced (cf.. Zech 12:10; John 19:37), and we glimpse the full truth of the human being.

This morning we stand in the shadow, indeed in the brilliant light of Calvary and we invoke the Holy Spirit. This is because without the Holy Spirit, according to the Book of Genesis, the human being is no more than a lump of soil in the hand of God (cf. 2:7). Without the Holy Spirit, Jesus remains dead in the tomb and the Church is a corpse rather than the Body of Christ radiant with the fullness of life, the Church of Pentecost. Without the Holy Spirit, the law becomes an earth-bound exercise of power where we may have prescriptions and penalties but little justice and no mercy. Therefore: may the Spirit of God come upon you, so that the law-courts will be places not only of justice but also of grace, places where the crucifix may not be found but where the truth of the Cross is inscribed on the hearts of those, like you, to whom the work of the courts is entrusted. Amen.