

**Sermon given by the Archbishop of Canterbury at a Service of Thanksgiving in
the Presence of Her Majesty the Queen to mark the 400th Anniversary of the
Grant of Letters Patent by King James I to Inner and Middle Temple.**

‘Not far removed from Mount Olympus, but somewhat nearer to the blessed regions of the West, is the most favoured abode of Themis. Washed by the rich tide which now passes from the towers of Caesar to Barry’s halls of eloquence...stand those quiet walls which Law has delighted to honour by its presence. What a world within a world is the Temple!...how gravely respectable its sober alleys, though removed but by a single step from the profanity of the Strand and the low iniquity of Fleet Street!...Where can retirement be so complete as here? Where can you be so sure of all the pleasures of society?’

Like many of Trollope’s great purple passages, this encomium of the Temple (from ch.14 of *The Warden*) is written with tongue firmly in cheek. The earthly paradise he sketches is the abode of one of the more malignant characters of that generally amiable book, the barrister-turned-journalist, Tom Towers. But, to quote another of our authoritative literary voices, let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. For all Trollope’s elephantine irony – and he was no great admirer of lawyers as a class, it must regretfully be said – he can’t help being captivated by the sense of monastic withdrawal he feels in the courts of the Temple.

What a very odd thing to feel, we might say: the law is not, surely, about monastic withdrawal at all. It is one of the clearest images of the active rather than the contemplative life. The lawyer accumulates knowledge not for meditation but for use, for what St Augustine called ‘science’ as opposed to ‘wisdom’. The air of thoughtful reclusion evoked so well by the novelist must be something of an illusion – rather like the remarks made by starry-eyed visitors to stress-laden monasteries, or even to Lambeth Palace, about the air of calm purposiveness that pervades the scene.

But let us give Trollope the benefit of the doubt for a moment. For behind all the frantic busyness of the practice of the law there lies something so strange and even counter-intuitive that we can only understand it in terms that go well beyond the mere management of rules. It is this: law exists so that power shall not be everything in human society. From the ancient world onwards there has been a need to argue this: Plato’s Republic begins by posing the question of why law is not the same as power; and it answers the question only by imagining a training in disinterested vision and virtue for all lawmakers and law practitioners. The Inns of Court may not be the home of regular contemplation or even, invariably, of disinterested virtue; but they exist because someone has had, and some people still have, the vision of something beyond power: some order of reality in which the worth of persons is established in terms that aren’t vulnerable to the struggling rivalries of this or that society at this or that period.

Solomon’s Temple, as we heard in our first lesson, was designed as ‘a resemblance of the holy tabernacle, which thou hast prepared from the beginning’. It was seen by the Jews of Our Lord’s day as representing the restored and reintegrated universe – a genuine earthly paradise, in fact, reflecting the mind of God in which all things subsisted in an active and eternal peace. The Temple was a very visible symbol of how all things existed first in relation to their Creator, in whose will lay their peace. Out of that recognition, according to the Book of Wisdom, flows the discernment and prudence that enables just rule; out of that recognition flows the vision of what lies above and beyond power. And that transcendent dimension is what anchors the

acknowledgement of abiding worth in things and persons: it animates alike law, mathematics, art and music. It is the foundation of a truly shared human joy and fulfillment. Trollope on the 'pleasures of society' within the walls of *this* Temple offers a faint echo of the promise of universal joyful interdependence that is the vision of the Jewish and the Christian heavens.

The greatest theologian to speak from this pulpit tells the same tale. Richard Hooker turns decisively away from a theology in which the sovereign will of God is everything to insist that 'the being of God is a kind of law to his working'. God's loving valuation of what he has made in his wisdom is not to be overridden by appeal to an arbitrary omnipotence. The ultimate truth about God is not that he has the monopoly of power but that he is the eternal home of truth and order, out of which comes his unqualified love for what he has made. It is his own nature that is the ground of what he wills and does. Hence we say we can trust him, can have faith in him; we do not go in terror of his arbitrary will, since his nature is unchanging. And because that is what we believe about God, we see how to look at and make sense of the world he has made and the world of human intelligence and creativity we inhabit. What matters most, what is most human, is not power but truth – and so also law, the guarantee of human value recognised.

Hence the significance of the Lord's parable in our second reading. The lawyer begins his questioning in a place where many lawyers, I dare say, are tempted to begin: 'What are the limits of my duty?' he asks. To whom do I have an obligation? And Jesus replies by saying that there is no limit to the obligation to compassion. This is not to oppose mercy to justice but rather to affirm that mercy, the passionate care for the wellbeing even of the most strange, the least attractive, the least deserving, is a universal summons. To use the law for the wellbeing of all, to use even its penal provisions for the general good and for the restoring of shattered relations, is to acknowledge that what law is about is simply the securing of people's dignity, not because they have earned it but because their humanity is valued by God. In this sense, all true justice is, to use a newly fashionable phrase, restorative justice.

The earthly paradise? Well, not all that visibly perhaps; yet this picture of law as simply the witness and guardian of dignity does at least point to that always elusive, always betrayed realm in which we are enabled to be ourselves without loss to others and in fidelity to our Maker. Always elusive and always betrayed: and so always vulnerable. Say what you like about the majesty of the law, the fact is that if law is truly about what is beyond power it will find itself in risky situations. The author of our Charter, no less, found himself challenged by a Lord Chief Justice appealing to the law's authority even over princes. The principles we take for granted were hard won, against a political power very ready, in the early modern period, to exercise itself against lawyers, though seldom as ruthlessly, thank God, as in some states. In how many tyrannies, from the Third Reich to present-day Zimbabwe, do the courts bravely state the limits of power only to have that power avenge itself on them with brutality? And the Christian may grieve and rage at this – but not be surprised. The God who will not exercise power for power's sake because truth and love come first is the God we encounter on the cross of Jesus, the God whose sheer respect for the dignity of what he has made will not permit him to force or threaten. His being is a law to his working.

And so, when we look at the magnificent new window which commemorates this happy anniversary, we might do worse than think about the meaning of the twin symbols there depicted of the halls of this Temple. Pegasus, the winged horse; the

Lamb and Flag. Plato imagined the human self as a chariot driven by a ruling intelligence but drawn by two horses, one co-operative, one rebellious; bit by bit, the passions of the soul are educated, rebellion is subdued and the self takes wing. The chariot flies up towards truth. But at the same time the sacrificed Lamb of God reminds us that in this world truth and thus lawfulness may be vulnerable. The challenge is to hold the eyes of violence without flinching, even to humiliation and death, and not to surrender to naked power.

We learn to hold the eyes of violence, to keep our vision steady, if we indeed remember that the foundation of law is where Solomon sought it, in the contemplation of God's faithful self-consistency, of the truth of what he has made and loves. 'What a world within a world is the Temple!' wrote Trollope. But that world within a world is in fact a true microcosm, the universe in small space. Here, when this great foundation is being what it is capable of being, the path is opened to the City where God dwells, to the habitation of wisdom. 'She knoweth and understandeth all things, and she shall lead me soberly in my doings, and preserve me in her power...and then shall I judge thy people righteously.'

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