On 15 February 1214, eight hundred years ago, King John arrived in France for his last and most disastrous campaign. Its failure led to rebellion and, in 1215, to the sealing of Magna Carta.

The Temple was the London headquarters of the crusading Knights Templar. It was also King John’s London headquarters during the crisis of 1214-15. From here the King issued charter after charter; here he and the barons met for pivotal negotiations; here three of the Charter’s protagonists were buried, two with effigies that survive to this day.

Today, the Temple is at the centre of legal London - the home of the two legal colleges or Inns of Court, Inner and Middle Temple. Sunday morning here was a fitting place and time at which to reflect upon the fundamental debt all modern law - and so much of our way of life - owes to the principles of Magna Carta; and upon the inspiring lives of those who crafted it.

The Temple Singers gathered in the mouth of the Temple’s Round Church, built c.1162. Behind them were the effigies of William Marshal, father and son, two of the heroes of Runnymede. The elder Marshal, as Regent, re-issued the Charter under his own seal in 1216 and 1217. In front of the choir was the chancel built in 1240 for Henry III, who re-issued the Charter in its final form in 1225.

The choir sang praise where the choirmen and choristers of the Temple Church will in January 1215 have sung to King John and the barons in the constitutional crucible from whose fire emerged the rights, in their earliest form, that now protect from tyranny over two billion people in our world.

On 15th February 1214 King John arrived at Rochelle in Western France at the head of an army. He was determined to recover the lands he’d lost to the French king ten years before. John’s wars were ruinously expensive; he levied ever higher taxes to pay for them. On 27th July 1214, John lost, disastrously, the Battle of Bouvines. His French ambitions were at an end. He returned to England, bankrupt of authority and of cash.
Rebellion was in the air. But its success was not assured. There was no obvious rival to put on the throne. In prospect was a desperate, prolonged civil war. Who could stop it?

One man, vital to the coming months, had returned to England after eight years of exile: Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, chosen by the Pope in 1205 but acknowledged by King John only under threat of French invasion in 1213. Langton had spent his exile lecturing in theology, in Paris. He’d developed five principles for the constitution of a nation governed justly under God:

• First: For protection against wicked kings in Israel, God had ordered the written codification of laws. Modern laws as well, then, should if necessary be codified.

• Secondly: In honour of God, the people have the right to resist a wicked king if he commands a mortal sin.

• Next: The people have a particular right to resist a king who renders a decision without the judgment of his court.
• Fourthly: The Church is the congregation of all the faithful, including the clergy and laity who elect the king.

• And finally: The Archbishop, because of his particular dignity, has the duty to act in the name of all the faithful, both clergy and laity.

Langton hadn’t been trained for high office. His thought might well have remained the work, deep but arcane, of an academic theologian. But in July 1213 Langton was recalled to England. He really was, at last, Archbishop of Canterbury.

Within weeks, at Winchester he made King John swear to abolish evil laws, establish good laws, and judge all his subjects by the just sentences of his courts. Days later he warned the king: to act against anyone without judgment of his court would violate the Winchester oath. Then Langton found the Coronation Charter of rights granted by the revered King Henry I, and swore to help the barons secure such a charter from John.

When the barons met the king here in the Temple, for a disastrous week of negotiations in January 1215, they invoked once more the Winchester oath and Henry’s charter. It was then, for the first time, that the barons demanded the king’s own allegiance to a charter. The king himself was to be subject to law.
Langton remained loyal to the beleaguered king. But he urged the king to meet the barons’ demands for a charter of rights and liberties. And eventually, at Runnymede on 15 June 1215, the king reluctantly put his seal to ‘the Great Charter’, Magna Carta, ‘for the honour of God and the exaltation of Holy Church and the reform of the king’s realm’.

\textit{Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.}

Langton is not above reproach; and it was not just his own insistence which brought John to Runnymede. But all the authority he had, he used to keep the peace and to generate a just government under God. Informed by scripture and by years of exile among the king’s enemies, he was ready to be the statesman that England needed.

At the heart of Magna Carta lie two clauses, still part of English law, that have been embedded in every constitution in the Common Law world and in many beyond; they protect from tyranny over two billion people in the world today.

\begin{quote}
‘No free man shall be taken or imprisoned or dispossessed or outlawed or exiled or in any way ruined, nor will we go or send against him except by the lawful judgment of his equals or by the law of the land. To no one will we sell, to no one will we deny or delay right or justice.’
\end{quote}

And who would check that the King was conforming to the Charter? The barons were to choose twenty-five of their number to maintain the peace and liberties which the King had granted. Those Twenty-Five ‘with the commune of all the land’ could seize the king’s own castles, lands and possessions, to force him to conform.
In such checks and balances on the use of power Magna Carta was reaching out towards principles that were hundreds of years ahead of their time. Within weeks, the Pope annulled the Charter at the king’s request. When Langton refused to publish the annulment, he was suspended by the Pope. The Archbishop was nobody’s man. *Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Neither the Church nor its leaders have now the authority in our nation’s life enjoyed by Langton and his English Church. It would be foolish to pine for such lost glory or to fantasize about its return. But Langton stands before us still, an example to all those who lead our Church and to all of us who ask what now should be its role. In this country, we’re all among the heirs, living all over the world, of this man who used his authority to maintain peace and generate justice. And on the freedoms which he helped to secure our whole culture of liberal democracy is ultimately built.

Most of us, most of the time, lead low-key, local and settled lives. May we all be worthy of that Archbishop who sought to realize in the Charter, for the whole endangered kingdom, the biblical conditions for just government under God. His vision, mediation and courage bore fruit that has ever since been a blessing to God’s world. *Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be filled.*

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