

Archbishop Justin joined the St-Martin-in-the-Fields community today for their Sunday morning celebration of the Eucharist. Read the text of his sermon below.



Sermon after the death of Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II; I Timothy 2:1-7

As prepared for delivery:

We know that every one of us will be judged. Every person who has died is judged. They are judged first in this world. They – and we – are judged second before God, with absolute truth and perfect love. They are not judged on their positions, or their achievements, or on popularity, but in the light of the just mercy of God which is to be welcomed or to be turned from. It is a judgement that is the same for everyone, for there is no partiality.

Yet before death there are differences. There is the reality that for good or ill some people are able to shape a society because of the position they hold.

In St Paul's time society was hierarchical to a huge degree. Your social status gave you honour or shame, not necessarily by your choice but by the circumstances of birth or the progress of life. A slave had no honour, or even personhood, they were a chattel, transferable. With rare exceptions a woman was a lesser being than a man. Christian communities were seen as suspicious and revolutionary because they included women and slaves as equals before God. The powerful were expected to see women and slaves as those for whom Christ died – as much as themselves.

In St Benedict's Rule for monasteries, from the 5th-6th centuries, the place of monks in a monastery was set out as resulting from the quality of their monastic life and the date and time of entering the monastery, and St Benedict was quite clear it was nothing to do with birth, wealth or status. In fact he says in his rule that if someone from a poor family or even a slave comes into the monastery a few hours before someone from an aristocratic family that person or slave from the poor family will always be senior in the monastery.

Yet Christian communities, despite this vision, in common with everyone else, have always had to live with the reality of the hierarchy and social structure in which they live, and have usually been corrupted by them. There is a tension between the ideal and the actual, even when the age of absolutism had passed in our own country.

If we are living in a democracy we can challenge the order of the world in words, or in demonstrations, but we still have to recognise its reality.

The protesters who hold up signs saying #notmyking, or in some countries #notmypresident are entitled to protest, and that entitlement springs ironically from the order they criticise, for the King is their King, whether they like it or not, as a President would be their President, whether they like it or not. They may disagree, but they cannot wish any authority away. Human society always evolves towards order, good or bad, just or unjust, gentle or cruel, chosen or imposed.

But what do we do when to our eyes the order is evil?

Then we are even more back to the tension which is addressed here in I Timothy. There was a King, or an Emperor or proconsul. Minority groups were threatened as were most of the churches at the time of the letter, and as are very many today. We would add now, in too many countries, religious minorities, LGBTQI+ people, ethnic groups, political oppositions, refugees and those fleeing war, those with disabilities, the elderly, the unborn, those without financial resources and so on in an endless and endlessly dismal list of human prejudices and persecutions.

Paul resolves the tension with a recognition of the reality and a subversion of the claims of hierarchies and governments.

The recognition of the reality is found in verses 1-4. Governments, Kings, rulers have power. Yet Paul says, their power can be used for an orderly society, in which those otherwise vulnerable may flourish.

Order is almost always better than disorder. I have worked at times, in places of anarchy - literally meaning "no ruler" - and they are places of nothing good. They are post-apocalyptic dystopias as grim as those found in any movie, there is misery and death at every turn, small groups of the survivors and the extinction of an even vaguely expectant future.

The heart of these verses 1-4, is survival. Paul wants the church to survive, to exist in peace, in a society where the terrors of imminent and cruel death are not so present that the good news of Jesus Christ is obscured by the daily struggle for life.

Such is the blessing of stability of government and wisdom of its leaders. In general that has been to some extent the blessings we have enjoyed for very many years. We prayed for our Queen, who represented order, and we pray for our King. We also pray for our leaders politically, and note it does not say only when we agree with them.

Yet because Paul in those days knew of the evil and cruelty of rulers so there is the subversion in these verses of saying they are under God's authority. If they are to be prayed for with a clear aim of good and peaceful order in society it is because they are not the final authority in the world.

At the time of the letter the Emperor in Rome and others, increasingly claimed they were the authority of the world, the final authority as in one way or another they do today. There is not time now to examine the questions of how we should respond to evil government, or decisions of government that are morally wrong, although it is an essential question. But let us remember that whatever the claims, we know that God is absolute. No government or system can truthfully make that claim.

That is the challenge of Christian churches to all who claim absolute authority, including those within the church. They are prayed for because they are not absolute. It makes many governments and leaders fearful. They want country and system - their system - before God, not the

reverse. Paul tells us that God first, rightly lived in all God's grace and love, then country and system, is what guarantee the common good.

Paul goes on to speak of the greatest revolution in history, one in which only the blood of God was shed, on a cross outside Jerusalem. He says that rulers of this world only have authority in this world, and they require a mediator with God as much as the lowest slave of that time, or the most despised person of our time. All are equally accountable to God. What subversion of false power claims! Kipling is right, "still stands thine ancient sacrifice, an humble and a contrite heart."

The queue, which has since Wednesday passed Lambeth Palace in an ever flowing stream, has not so much come to see as come to acknowledge. It has included those obviously sleeping rough, those who are famous, those who have served in the military, with their rows of medals, and those who are just like all of us. People have come of every type, whether age, sex, ethnicity or significance. Listening to them in three spells of engagement with the crowd I have heard many things, some heart-breaking stories of grief reawakened, others of memories of the Queen, but above all a sense of thank you. We recognise that here was someone who lived out what was intended in both parts of this passage.

Her Late Majesty was very definitely a leader, and a monarch. She was not proud, but she accepted her vocation which was in 1953 and will be next year so significantly set out in the coronation. She knew her calling and lived it.

At the same time, like His Majesty the King, that did not make her proud. She knew Christ her mediator, she knew her own limits of responsibility, and she knew her accountability to God.

That is the cause, recognised or not, for our thankfulness and for our hope. A Queen or King - or President or Prime Minister - may accept their role as vocation to service of those they lead, and may accept their accountability and the limits of their role. If they do, we find our best prospect of peace, and they find their possibility of fame and love in this world and their hope of glory in the next.

That is why thankfulness rises in so many hearts and in all sorts of people. They queue for 24 hours for a brief moment of saying thank you. Let us thank them that by their patience, good humour and endurance they speak for so many.

Let us thank God for a reign that has been based in faith. Let us pray for all our leaders, and for our King, for in so doing we recognise reality and we declare that God is absolute; in judgement, in mercy, and supremely in love.

7 min read

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