

Pusey House, 6 February 2011

It is a great privilege for me to come and join in your worship here at Pusey today. As some of you know, I trained for ordination here in Oxford in the mid-1970s, a little way further North, on the Banbury Road, at a time when Wycliffe Hall wasn't quite what it is today, and Pusey was in a period of some decline. But even then, there was no mistaking the different emphases of the two institutions!

I came then to value days spent in the Upper Library, reading dry and dispiriting analyses of the Old and New Testament by scholars like Gerhardt von Rad and Rudolph Bultmann; but finding nourishment for my soul in your Library, with a wistful sense that the faith that had inspired Dr Liddon and Bishop Gore might still have something to say to John Robinson and Don Cupitt - remember them?

It was here that I came across the work of E L Mascall, which suggested that there might be other and maybe richer ways of expressing a robust counter-cultural proclamation of the Christian message than the Christian Union Evangelicalism that characterised so many of my contemporaries along the road. I owe a great deal to Pusey House and to its Library for those formative encounters.

And perhaps I should add that it was here that I came across the collection of rather dusty canon law books that Eric Kemp had been amassing. I had already qualified and practised as a lawyer for some time before coming here, and I have to say that those books interested me then about as much as they probably interest most of you now. I had no idea, and certainly no expectation, that I might later be spending a quarter of a century and more of my life working as a canon lawyer.

The question I would have asked my younger self is the question I am often asked by people today: 'What need does the Church have of law?' Isn't the Church supposed to live by Grace, above the Law; surely we are not meant to spend our energy on 'the Letter that kills', but rather on 'the Spirit that gives life'?

And of course at one level, the answer is simple. We *are* called to live by faith, a life that is marked by 'love, joy, peace...' and all the other fruits of the Holy Spirit's presence with us, 'against which, as St Paul reminds us 'there is no law'.

But that doesn't mean that laws and rules don't have a place in the Christian scheme of things, and in particular in the organised life of Churches. Churches are vehicles for God's action in the world, but they are also human, and often only-too-human, organisations. 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels'.

The law is part of the 'earthen vessel' aspect of the Church's life. There needs to be order as well as charism, as St Ignatius pointed out. So in the work that I do, a lot of my time and my staff's time is spent advising clergy about the law of marriage, about contracts for building work on churches, about safeguarding parishioners' personal information in accordance with the Data Protection Act, about the opportunities the new legal structures for Academies present to the Church in its mission to young people, and many other practical issues of the same kind, where aspiration and implementation meet head-to-head.

We need law in the Church because things sometimes go wrong: some of the most harrowing cases I deal with involve clergy discipline, when people stray over acceptable boundaries and bring themselves and the Church into disrepute. Thankfully, none of the recent cases have been quite as bizarre as the celebrated case of the Revd Harold Davidson in the 1920s, who was defrocked, and ended up working in a circus, where he was finally eaten by a lion. We do things differently now to the way they were done then, but problems do arise in ministry, and the Church needs good laws to deal with difficult situations.

At their highest, the *Canons of the Church of England* encapsulate the doctrinal foundation of the Church's life. Canon A5 reminds us that 'The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures...'

It is a legal requirement that on ordination, and whenever clergy take up a new appointment, they 'declare [their] belief in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, and to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness ...' (Canon C15.1)

At a rather different but no less important level, the Church Representation Rules and the Standing Orders of the Synods set out how we are to go about dealing with some of the matters that affect us most profoundly. There are two such matters currently working their way through the synodical process, and around the dioceses now, and I don't want to be squeamish about naming them, because they illustrate my point: one is the Anglican Covenant, about our relations with other Anglican Churches around the world, and the other is Women Bishops. Both are delicate and difficult. Both are causing us real heart-ache and division. Neither lends itself to simple 'knock-down, drag-out' solutions. Each will carry crucially painful implications, whatever decision is finally made.

Now whatever your views may be about those issues, the fact is that we need legal structures in order to test the mind of the Church, and to put in place the right kind of safeguards and protections for all who will feel most hurt or disregarded or marginalised – whichever side of these issues they may be on. Whichever way the women bishops' legislation goes, there will be men and women in our Church who will feel that the Church has turned its back on them, and scorned the ministry they give – whether it be the ministry of men or the ministry of women. We need strong laws, effectively implemented, to protect our relationships with each other, and to affirm the value of the treasured gifts of ministry entrusted to us by the Lord of the Church.

Without doubt, our Church is an 'earthen vessel', and it is perhaps in the context of this controversy that we see most clearly its earthiness and fragility. That's the reason, to my mind, that it needs law to guide it. But the Treasure is not the law. The law at its best is a blunt, rough-and-ready instrument. No, the Treasure it seeks to safeguard is the same Treasure of faith that sustained Dr Pusey, and Dr Liddon, and Bishop Gore, and Professor Mascall, and all those millions of men and women of faith there have been through the ages and are today across the world.

Christ is the Treasure Who offers Himself to us this morning, in Word and Sacrament; to Him be glory for ever and ever. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.