

SERMON PREACHED IN RIPON COLLEGE CHAPEL

on Sunday 25 APRIL 1993 during the Ecclesiastical Law Society Conference by
the Bishop of Blackburn, the Rt. Revd. Alan Chesters
The second Sunday after Easter

St. Luke 24 v 27: He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

This is Eastertide. This is Sunday, the first day of the week when with our fellow Christians throughout the world we celebrate that truth which makes us Christians. We rejoice in the fact that Christ is risen from the dead. It is the resurrection Faith which for almost two thousand years has brought to communities and to individuals the grace of His glorious light shining in the darkness, has given the renewal of hope amidst so much fear and offered that sense of life and ultimate freedom when at first sight things seemed to bind us and limit our growth. This Easter faith, which caused those two confused and tired men on that Road to Emmaus to turn on their heels and walk the seven miles back to Jerusalem to tell their friends that Jesus was alive, is the faith which has transformed lives for good ever since. It is that transformation of lives through the grace of the risen Lord, that bringing of love where all seems full of hatred, that offering of faith where all seems confused in doubt which is the guarantee in the Church and for each of us of the truth of the resurrection of Jesus.

This is the Faith which inspires those who claim to be Christians, which must inspire you as ecclesiastical lawyers although it may seem to not a few clergy and churchwardens, and at times even to some of you, a very long way from the empty tomb of that first Easter morning to the Faculty Jurisdiction and the Consistory Court! Indeed, I did wonder when Chancellor Edwards invited me to give this address whether among bishops I had not drawn the short straw in being asked to preach to this congregation with the readings appointed for today. If we are honest, the truth is that for most people the Law and its application is a complete turn off. It conjures up pictures of dusty bound volumes, strange conventions of dress and speech, and none more so than that Confirmation of a bishop in which I participated four years ago this very weekend, when I understand a spirited legal attempt was being made to prove that I was the one whom I claimed to be and not some interloper seeking the See of Blackburn under false pretences! As for that light with which Easter abounds, it has to be admitted as some would-be wit once said 'The minute you read something you cannot understand, you can almost be sure that it was written by a lawyer!'

Of course nothing could be further from the truth. That is the kind of comment which we expect to hear in the General Synod when the back benchers have one of their regular outbursts at those who attempt to administer the law, the complexity of much of which they readily forget they created in the first place. It is not simply because of my experience of my first Registrar, whose eyes shine in sheer delight when presented with a really difficult point of ecclesiastical law, that I want to claim that ecclesiastical lawyers are to be seen as Easter people. It is a privilege to share this eucharist with you because your task is surely to take sinful human situations for what they really are and not, as so often happens in the life of the church, as mere aberrations people in their fantasy easily take them to be.

No, you seek with sound advice or, if it comes to that, by fair judgment to bring reconciliation to those at variance and by so doing to release people from that prison created by their disputes with others or by their own ill discipline which limits the freedom of others in the household of faith. Your words and judgments provide a means to release such people to find new freedom in the power and service of the Gospel.

Of all the Easter stories the walk to Emmaus is my favourite. What St. Luke describes there begins with those expressions of doubt, of difficulty in discerning the evidence with that resultant confusion which in its wake brings weariness and apprehension. This is the situation of many who turn to you for advice, guidance or judgment. There is a realism in this story for in fact those two disciples of the Lord did not know which way to turn. There was no obvious or easy answer to their questions. And what did the Risen Lord do when he entered the situation? He listened. He listened to them as they rehearsed yet again, supposedly for his benefit, 'those things about Jesus of Nazareth'. He first listened and we must always be careful to do that so that we know what the actual difficulty is. Then, having listened, Jesus examined the evidence. He took their hope and what we might call their title deeds, (their source of faith and hope, the Old Testament) and with that the experience they had recently had of the man Jesus and he interpreted the one in relation to the other so that together they found the truth. Expressed in simple terms he affirmed them as people, he met their need and showed them the way forward in the light of the evidence they had to hand. Is not that the task of the ecclesiastical judge and of the registrar and bishop's Legal Secretary as they play their part in the life of a church which is made up of sinners seeking by grace to live together the Easter life?

Your very existence in the life of the Church of England is a perpetual reminder of the real state in which we must live and in which Divine Grace is both sought and given. If we need lawyers it means that some of us are not as good as we should like to be and our sin or failure to live up to what is required may have grievous consequences for others which have to be put right if the community is to live in peace. Your existence reminds us of the sad fact that Christians will disagree on quite important matters and their disputes will reach such a point that they need settlement by those who have listened and pondered the evidence in the light of those laws and customs based on that faith which we have in the risen Lord through Scripture and tradition. You refuse to allow Christians to live with false premises about the rosiness of life and, along side that reconciliation which is given to the individual sinner who repents, you seek to order the life of the community where the bonds which we might expect love to create break down. That is an Easter activity for, as someone remarked, 'Order in human society is the first requisite of freedom' or as William Pitt the Elder put it 'Where law ends there tyranny begins'. It is all very well acknowledging the fundamental Christian aspiration that we must love our neighbours but as Peter Ustinov remarked in Durham Cathedral when he was being installed as Chancellor of Durham University, 'the Lord cannot possibly have known my neighbours! Sometimes the freedom which brings Life can only be created when arbitration based on the evidence of the case presented is allowed to settle a dispute at least in the eyes of the community. True, others may have to come in to pick up the pastoral implications for the individuals concerned, as not infrequently happens to the archdeacon or even the bishop when a faculty application fails, not least in

Blackburn if it is the wording for a headstone! We must not allow those with what is undoubtedly a true enthusiasm for the Gospel to live in a cloud cuckoo land, that simply being desirous to serve the Lord makes us all agree as to how the church should be ordered. Two thousand years of Christian history easily disprove that. Rather, you must protest your high calling as one which seeks to enable the Easter People to live together in harmony or, perhaps better expressed in our times, as to live together in unity in spite of our obvious diversity which is about to be enshrined in Law.

Thus modelling yourselves in faith on the Lord as those disciples experienced him on the Road to Emmaus, you will not be afraid to say a word in season – ‘O foolish men’ but more importantly you will believe that change and transformation of people and situations are part of the Easter gift. I imagine that when you felt the calling to be a lawyer, in whatever capacity, you believed that by your work the world might be a better place. You were not going to be a visionary, a prophet or a teacher and you were not on the whole called to a life of priestly sacrifice but you were going so to train your mind that having considered the evidence you could give advice or render judgment between people or the Church and its members which would not only be fair and seen to be fair but also help the Church’s essential work of witnessing for Christ. You are called to play a part in that offering a new life and hope which are the fruits of Christ’s Easter victory and at the same time in showing care for people in a whole variety of ways. I hope that is your vision and the inspiration for your work.

However, the Emmaus story is not quite finished and neither is what you will need to live out the vision amidst the vagaries of life. For in the nature of things you must see that seemier side when Christians do not always behave as we might expect them to do. You deal with the brokenness of life in the victims who come to you for help. You need grace to sustain your vision in the face of sin and failure on the one hand and of tragedy on the other. Like the men on the road to Emmaus if you are to discern the living Jesus in the doubt and confusion brought by your professional duties as well as your humanity, then like them you need to feed on the Risen Christ. For the reality of the situation acknowledged, the listening to the evidence and its interpretation completed, Jesus is shown to them in the simple act of the breaking of the bread. Today in this Chapel at his command we shall once more offer our lives and this Ecclesiastical Law Society to God as we present the bread and wine of our work and leisure to Him. He will, as he promised, take them as he takes us and together we offer ourselves to be broken in union with Christ. Then in the wonder of this sacrament Christ feeds us with his Easter grace. In that moment with our hands out stretched to receive him would it be too much to claim that law, grace and freedom come together in each of us. He feeds us not for ourselves but so that we may once more be renewed in that Easter faith, hope and love by which our lives are transformed for good. Renewed like the men from Emmaus you must leave the security of the table we have shared together to be witnesses for Christ as tomorrow and the day after you consider the evidence presented to you by those at variance, those who require change, those who are at odds with their fellow Christians. Endowed once more with His Grace you will seek to do what is necessary to help us your fellow Christians live together as sharers in that Easter Faith by which all things can be made new. For the Easter gospel is good news, not simply a new approach to things but a transformation of life in its entirety. What is wrong is put right; the diseased made whole and the poor given their due. To a share in that life-giving work you are called.