

'MIGHTY ACTS OF JUDGMENT'

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*Bishop of Durham**A Sermon at the Society's Conference at Manchester on 16 March 1997*

As we celebrate the Lord's death in this service, I want to encourage you to put the Cross at the centre of our deliberations about Gospel and order. It might help to relate judgment with the vertical arm of the Cross and mercy with the horizontal.

A verse from the Old Testament reading points the way.

Exodus 6.6: 'I will redeem you with an arm outstretched and with mighty acts of judgment'.

It is in a combination of the outstretched arm and judgment that redemption is promised.

The outstretched arm speaks of companionship, care, compassion—an assurance that hope is at hand and the possibility of a new beginning. To the Christian it brings to mind the Cross. Love there is demonstrated by an outstretched arm pinned by a nail. It is a permanent invitation. The Cross is love in action. It is ultimate, complete love and has drawn men and women to him down the ages.

It is not sentimental love. It is the love which invites. It is the truth which sets free. Perhaps the nearest comparison in our human experience is the marriage covenant. There, as in the act of redemption, truth without love is clinical and employs only a part of us. Love without truth is empty and ephemeral.

The full Gospel is love and truth in abundance. And deliverance for Moses' band of people includes the truth of judgment—mighty acts of judgment. It is judgment which sets free its object because truth, however initially unpalatable, really does set free. The clergyman at the centre of the recent Consistory Court in Durham was a new man when it was over. Until truth is out and judgment is delivered, there is the imprisonment of uncertainty, of chaos and deception. Judgment draws a line under which there is the possibility of new beginnings. Judgment, even for the guilty, is a liberation into truth, into order, into new frameworks which offer fresh possibilities.

Judgment also sets free those who are violated. For recompense has been paid, retribution is at hand and danger is passed. Again, a line has been drawn in history and a new start is possible.

The mighty acts of judgment, which are promised to Moses, are awesome but they are not fearsome in the sense of turning all to stone. Acts of judgment are liberating. They are what D. H. Lawrence described as 'The profound and thrilling vibration of justice—the sense of ultimate justice makes the heart suddenly quiver with love'.

But judgment is not only to do with individuals. It is part of a covenant relationship with a people, a nation, and for us as a Church. Judgment was to bring recognisable order to God's people. They were, in the new-found freedom which judgment brought, to be given fresh purpose, new communal value and a framework they could trust.

In a real sense judgment (and the justice it expressed) was a framework of absolutes which were to be worked out in the detailed living of a long pilgrimage. To live under authority, under judgment, was their only pathway to freedom. When they ignored it then chaos rather than order, and destruction rather than life, threatened. It was situational judgment, applied to everyday life, but it was not built on a code of expediency. It was not that life would simply be more bearable without the Egyptians (indeed, it is questionable whether the wilderness was better than Goshen from a comfort point of view). It was not simply that life would be better if they didn't kill or steal or covet. It was the covenant which would be broken if they didn't think of themselves as the people of God—and therefore people of God's order and the judgment that implies.

When we look at the Cross, it is certainly an act of unconditional love. But it also encompasses the kind of judgment which was promised to Moses. At the Cross, lightning flashed. The veil of the temple was torn in two. The Son of God, now the victim of judgment, was crying in dereliction. And in those dreadful hours, the outstretched arm and mighty acts of judgment were focussed completely in *THE* act of deliverance—foreshadowed by Moses and the covenant people as they fled captivity and embarked upon a pilgrimage of faith and order.

I cannot help thinking that the scepticism which many clergy and laity bring to matters of law and order in the Church is something deeper than understandable frustration and impatience to 'get on with the job' without interference from lawyers. If it was just that, it might evoke my sympathy!

But this kind of attitude is symptomatic of a deficiency more grave and deep in the life of the Church. It is not just a question of giving ordinands and young priests a few talks about the Faculty Jurisdiction Measure and the Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure. It is about them and the whole Church understanding what redemption is all about. It is about love and forgiveness—yes. But it is also about sacrifice and obedience. It is about living within the covenant. It is about the restoration of God's order.

In the pick and mix culture which has infected the Church in its doctrinal teaching, in its liturgical revisions, in its ethical pronouncements, we have been embraced by the outstretched arm and forgotten the mighty acts of judgment which go with it. We have confused strong love with weak tolerance. We are guilty of that seductive blasphemy of sentimentalising the Cross. The symbol of the restoration of universal order has become an excuse for superficial self-indulgence. We respond to the cost and sacrifice of the Cross with the contradiction of undisciplined love. And the result is chaos not order, new slaveries and not ultimate freedom.

Love which is simply doing what seems right and feels good is empty if it does not include the acceptance of order and the responsibility which goes with it. The proclamation of the outstretched arm and mighty acts of judgment is exactly where Gospel and order come together. It is our responsibility, priests and lawyers, to make that real in an increasingly unruly Church.

In our preaching we can ensure that love does not come cheaply and that discipline and love for all God's people are the indispensable marks of a covenant people. In our judgments we can ensure that we can seek to convey discipline and maintain order in the context of sensitive and sacrificial love.

But we shall only discover and live in the shadow of those twin acts of redemption if we have taken them to ourselves. That we now, in this service, proclaim the Lord's death—and the deliverance it brings with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment—is an indication of where we focus our attention. Let this Passiontide draw us into that path. It is the way of freedom and deliverance for God's covenant people.