

Civic Service for the Mayor of Royal Leamington Spa, Cllr. Judith Clarke, at the Parish Church of All Saints, Leamington Priors on 9th February 2014.

If you offer food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness.

When my daughter's friend first saw me wearing a Bishop's ring and a Bishop's cross, she said 'Bishop Bling' – and that was a term of approval! If she were to walk down the front two rows in Church today.....! But whether we belong to what some of the mayors here call 'the chain gang' or whether we belong to the collar gang or whether we wear any of the trappings of office or not, it is good to be here and here *together*. Why? St John Chrysostom, early church father, wrote: *The highest expression of Christian love is to work together for the Common Good*. I would like to believe and I do believe that all of us here, whatever our background, whatever our faith, whatever our office have this in common, our desire to build and strengthen community life, working together for the good of all.

When Emperor Julian, some fifty years after the conversion of Constantine and thus of the Empire to Christianity, tried to eliminate Christianity from the Empire and reintroduce paganism, he failed. Lamenting this failure, he wrote '*these impious Galileans (meaning Christians) look after not only their own but ours as well*'. They demonstrated that God's love is indiscriminate, it is not tribal or sectarian, looking after only our own. As Jesus said God '*makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and on the unjust*.' Every human being matters to God. It is good to meet in this Church where Father Christopher recognises and demonstrates this in his own ministry and it is good, dare I say, to meet in this constituency, where our MP, Chris White recognises and works for the good of communities not only here but on a national stage,

work that has borne particular fruit in the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012. The fact that we may not always agree on what makes for the common good is inevitable and no bad thing as none of us has a monopoly on the truth, least of all the most dogmatic. So what are the criteria for truth?

People of faith look to God and revelation as well as to reason. Abraham Lincoln said *'My concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side.'* So how can we find out if we are doing what we want and asking God's blessing or doing what God wants? As Christians, and indeed people of other faiths, we look at our lives through the lens of the Scriptures. We have seen in the words of Jesus and in the life of Jesus that God's love is indiscriminate, it is for *all* people and it is unconditional. In Isaiah we see that if religious practice becomes a substitute for demonstrating this love, for feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless, we have lost the plot.

When Judy, Mayor of Royal Leamington Spa, and I spoke a little while ago, she was saying, how inspiring it is to see so many people and not least young people volunteering in so many ways and making such a difference in the lives of the needy in our communities, whether in Food Banks or Sheltering the homeless or Street Pastors or as Young Carers and in so many other ways. This serving, this giving is good. It blesses the blesser and the blessed. *'If you feed the hungry, if you shelter the homeless and clothe the naked'*, Isaiah writes, *'then your light shall break forth, then your healing shall spring up'*⁵⁸. There are so many examples across Warwickshire and Coventry of feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless and feeding them too. This is the law of God, as we give, we receive. To be fully human we need both to be giving and receiving. Just giving or just receiving is not enough.

Some thirty years ago, I worked for the Iona Community at the Youth Camp. Every summer we would have twenty borstal boys, brought up in a culture of

crime and hardened by it, come to Iona. They came off the Ferry as macho, swearing and contemptuous as you can imagine. What they didn't know was that for the next two weeks each of them would be looking after another young person who was physically handicapped and who would depend on them to make life physically possible. The change that came over their demeanour and attitudes over those two weeks was wonderful to behold. Each of these borstal lads experienced how much they mattered to the one they were looking after. They discovered that they had something to give and in giving they were able to let go of some of the macho cynicism which had earlier become a protective mask.

I was speaking to someone in January who told me that he had not only discovered a new sense of wellbeing since he had started work with a Farmers in crisis charity but that he had rediscovered his faith. When the present Government came to power, there was a lot of questioning of what makes for human wellbeing. Research was done at Warwick University and indeed in America on this. One of the experiments conducted involved giving money to 40 people. Twenty people were told to spend it on themselves and the other twenty to give to a person or cause that they felt really needed it. Having done as they were told they returned and the question the researchers were asking was which group would show the greatest sense of wellbeing or contentment as a result of what they had done. You may or may not be surprised that it was those who gave to the needy.

We are made, all of us, in the image of God, who is love and who is the Giver of all that we have. Made in his image, we become most truly ourselves when we give and when we love and when we demonstrate God's love for our neighbours and those among them who are struggling the most. Anthony of Egypt, the great desert Father and known as the Doctor of Egypt recognised this when he said '*My salvation is in my neighbour*'.

Today we celebrate with Judy the good things that are happening, we pray for her and the work of Warwickshire Young Carers and Myton Hospice, we pray for one another that each of us may play our part in the building and fostering of flourishing communities in the places in which we serve.

I'll finish with some words I read some years ago.

I sought my God my God I could not see. I sought my soul, my soul eluded me. I sought my neighbour and found all three.

+John Stroyan
9th February 2014