

**HOMILY OF ARCHBISHOP CUSHLEY AT THE RED MASS,
ST MARY'S METROPOLITAN CATHEDRAL, 22 SEPTEMBER 2013**

Every human being is made in the image and likeness of God, the elderly, the young, the unborn; even the dead demand our respect. Because we are made in God's image, our being, our existence - our very life - is sacred, because it is a participation in God's own life. We say "life is sacred" without thinking about it too much, but it is a fundamental truth and it is in the bedrock of how we relate to each other as a society - and that is why it is in the bedrock of the laws of our country. When we look at our country's law, we can see the various origins and influences upon those laws, and one of them is Christianity. Of course, that pleases me as a Christian, not because it makes the law biased in my favour but because I know that, philosophically, Christians start from the premise that all life is sacred, irrespective of creed or any other accidentals. And that is surely a good thing for everyone.

Wherever there are two or three people in one place, there is necessarily inter-relationship and inter-action, there are rules of conduct, there springs up a way of behaving. These are the beginnings of human society, and human society naturally develops law. Human laws are of course imperfect just as we are imperfect. They are always in need of updating to fit new circumstances, abrogation when no longer required, and so on. The application of those laws is also done in a human way, and so it is also open to error as well to their use as foreseen by the original legislators.

Perhaps there is only one law that never needs updating; it never requires changing, or distortion or re-interpretation, or abrogation; and that law is the law of God. The law of God is eternal law. It is perfect. It requires no updates. One psalm says: "The law of the Lord is perfect, it revives the soul; the law of the Lord is to be trusted, it gives wisdom to the simple". The

law of God is found - even today - at the basis of the law of the land. It is something for legislators to foster, and it is something for jurists to keep in mind as they interpret and apply the law. But what is the law of God? The psalm tells us that it is perfect, simple, and easily grasped by ordinary people. Why is it unique and eternal compared to human, positive law? What in a nutshell is the law of God?

The Opening Prayer of today's Mass tells us. It states: " O God, [you] founded all the commands of your sacred law upon love of you and of neighbour". Now, here is something very familiar, at least to Christians. Here is something immediately useful in our relationships even if we know nothing about law. Here is guidance for the wise and the simple alike. The basis of God's law - and we would suggest of all law - must be love of God and love of neighbour. All law, to some degree, must reflect the vertical and horizontal - our relationship with God and our relationship with our fellow human beings, including our own selves. If our human laws fail in either of these two dimensions, they will not stand the test of time, and they may well fail to promote the common good that the law must surely strive to uphold.

By contrast, laws that pass these two tests are surely set to endure for the good of the whole community, even non-believers.

Turning to our readings today, we see that they have comments to make upon the law, at least to an extent. The first reading from Amos, a fairly fiery Old Testament prophet, is a strong criticism of those who pay lip service to the law, but who "trample the needy" and "suppress the poor". They do this because they have forgotten that their laws and the way they live them will be futile until they restore in their behaviour love of God and of neighbour. The second reading also has a comment, not so much about the law, as about the commonweal, as St Paul calls on those reading his letter to pray for those in civil authority, so that all "may be able to live religious and

reverent lives in peace". It calls on us to pray for those who apply our laws, so that our society will be blessed with the peace and prosperity that come from God, not from our own efforts. The Gospel passage too, deals with the law, but only obliquely, as it examines the consequences of honesty and dishonesty. Our Lord praises the astuteness but not the dishonesty of a servant who knows how to use the things put in his charge to serve others and gain himself friends. So although the readings deal with the law peripherally, they still allow us to see the law of God at work, and they echo the sentiment first expressed in our Opening Prayer, that is the essential double ingredient for our laws to be good laws, sound laws.

Our laws must allow us to love God - not just worship him - but love him in our daily lives. And our laws, by natural extension, must encourage us to respect ourselves and to love our neighbours. Without these two elements - the vertical towards God and the horizontal towards each other - our society would close in on itself; the duties which balance our rights would wither away, and all we would be left with would be a shrill demand for my rights without reference to anyone or anything - in fact the antithesis of society, the creation of a "society of one" which is plainly a contradiction in terms.

Some would say that having any reference to the divine in our laws is outmoded, unrepresentative of the majority, a bias of some kind, and that there ought to be a more neutral basis for our laws. But if we wish our laws to promote the best for humanity, those laws must surely respect all life, all people. Surely we all agree on that. But we will only give our fellow men and women the respect and love they merit if we truly see our life as a gift from God. And we will only treat life as a gift from God if we live in loving reverence of the laws of the Creator.

“O God, [you] founded all the commands of your sacred law upon love of you and of our neighbour”: this vision is the corrective, whenever it is needed, to the narrower rights-based vision of law that is unfortunately proposed in some quarters nowadays as a kind of progress.

We renew our prayers for those gathered here today who apply our laws, that the Lord may bless them with wisdom, courage and holiness. And may all of us keep in mind that love of God and love of neighbour - a simple but effective test of law - will always help us keep our laws and their application true, and our society on the way to a more harmonious peace and a more balanced prosperity.