

Police Memorial Service, Glasgow Cathedral, 15 May 2010

My dear brothers and sisters, officers, family and friends of Strathclyde Police,

I am grateful for the opportunity to address you on this annual occasion when we gather to remember with respect those of your number, both active and retired, who have died within the last year.

This is also an occasion on which to salute the ongoing work of officers across the area whose labours ensure the steady running of our civil society. The word that comes to mind is a word probably used all too rarely in public discourse ... and that is the word "Thankyou".

It expresses the gratitude of a community which acknowledges that in your service you are to attend some of the most distressing and anxiety-filled moments of people's lives, in situations of conflict or even violence. I feel certain that I can speak for many when I offer you, the officers and staff of Strathclyde Police, a sincere vote of thanks for your work 24 hours a day, 365 days a year ... a work that for most of the time is hidden and silent, but which we never take for granted.

Today's readings can, I think, help us to reflect on the role and the responsibilities both of police officers and of the wider community in the preservation of peace and the promotion of the common good. The scripture readings have been chosen with a view to such reflection.

Our first scripture reading comes from the third chapter of the book of the prophet Ezekiel: *"I have appointed you as sentry to the House of Israel"*.

The prophet Ezekiel, one of the great prophets of the Old Testament, had a concern to defend the holy name of God and, in this reading, and not for the first time, he sees himself called to be like a sentry, someone posted on the battlements of a city, ready to go on the defensive, to challenge the intruder, ready to intercept the wicked man.

While I see in this image a clear reflection of the tasks performed by members of a police force, I also recognise that the application of this message is wider. We all have a duty to preserve and uphold the law, to stand up for what is right and to defend the weak and vulnerable - not only those who by profession are called upon to do so, but in one way or another, all of us.

Our psalm – psalm 111 – describes poetically the ideal citizen – the one we seek to uphold, the community we strive to defend ...

The good man – and I should add, the good woman - takes pity and lends (not to be defrauded) ... his justice stands firm for ever to be recognised; he is a light in the darkness for the upright; he conducts his affairs with honour; he will never waver; but with a steadfast heart he will not fear ... Your presence is an assurance that he will be able to go about fearlessly within his community.

Our reading from the Gospel of St Luke is taken from chapter 12 ... *You too must stand ready*

This image is in some way similar to the one from the prophet Ezekiel: “See that you are dressed for action and have your lamps lit”. The imagery Christ uses is one that I feel sure will strike a chord with this company: “You may be quite sure of this, that if the householder had known at what hour the burglar would come he would not have let anyone break through the wall of the house”.

But we can look at things from a different angle ... The sentry on duty, the police officer on his beat within the community, the officer ready to respond to a summons – this is the image of Ezekiel. But here Christ’s words have a more direct and personal connotation.

“Be like men waiting for their Master’s return ...”

Perhaps in reporting these words of Our Lord, the Gospel writer was thinking of the second coming of Jesus which the early Christians anticipated in their time. But, whether or not he did, there is surely a coming, a second coming, when each one of us at death comes face to face with the Lord. For that we have to try at all times to be ready; the lamp of faith lit and in our hands.

There are in truth in today’s world, many things which would barge like burglars into our inner sanctum, infiltrating our defences when we are least prepared, causing havoc in our personal and spiritual lives.

One final note occurred to me as I prepared this reflection, and it was the thought of Christ on the cross. He died, crucified between two thieves, one of whom upbraided Him, and the other of whom defended Him, rebuking his companion by saying that what they had done deserved their punishment but that the one who died between them was innocent. He addressed Jesus saying: “Master, remember me when you come into Your Kingdom.”

“Today,” replied Jesus, “You will be with Me in paradise”.

And that too has a lesson for us ... a lesson that all men and women, whatever their faults and sins, are redeemable, even some times at the last moments of

life. No-one falls beyond the realm of divine mercy, nor divine justice. And those two concepts are not mutually contradictory. For justice complements mercy just as mercy must temper justice.

However those whom we recall today from our company are those who have been on the side of right, and who, after a life of service to their community, have gone to their maker. For them life is changed, not ended, and when the body of their earthly dwelling lies in death they find an everlasting dwelling place in heaven.

It is with such thoughts that we comfort one other as we remember them at today's service.

My dear brothers and sisters, your work is not without its rewards though, even in this present time, and I am sure that as members of the police force you can look back on many occasions and find great satisfaction in having fulfilled your duty, and sense its significance and importance as a service to the whole community, having built and maintained a fence of law and order to maintain to protect what is good and to keep out what is evil.

When Jesus completes the story of the faithful servant awaiting his master's return, He does in a corresponding passage turn the tables on those who wait on Him by Himself dressing for action and serving them at table.

This is an image which alludes to the Eucharist which we Christians celebrate at this present time while it describes the fulfilment of that in the time to come.

May the Lord bless you all in His service!