

United Guilds Service 2025

The Very Rev'd Dr Mark Oakley, Dean of Southwark

It is a privilege to be with you this morning, but I realised that I first attended this service 30 years ago when I was Chaplain to the former Bishop of London. This has confirmed what I already knew. I'm getting old. My broad mind and narrow waist have now swapped places and as John Gielgud said, 'I've reached that age when most of my friends are either 'dead, deaf or living in the wrong part of Kent'. As I look around, I see I'm not quite alone. In the words of Ken Dodd, who would have thought any of us would have lived long enough to see the end of the DFS sale? I thought there was some hope when I heard recently there is a new app for the very elderly to find love, and then I heard what it's called – Carbon Dating.

So, its good to spend time with the young and feel a bit younger. So, let's for a moment going for a walk with an inquisitive child, a grandchild maybe, and we start up in Westminster and as we stand outside the House of Commons, and look up at the impressive buildings the child asks, 'What happens in there?' and you say, 'politics'. And she asks, 'What's politics about?' and you say: 'well, it's about the creation and distribution of power'.

She's quiet but we move on to the bridge and look down the river and see in the distance the City, the Banks and the strangely shaped large towers, and she asks 'What happens there?' and you say: 'economics'. And she says: 'What's economics about?' and you say: 'it's about the creation and distribution of wealth'. She looks at us.

And then we take the boat up to St Paul's, having pointed first, of course, at the very beautiful smaller cathedral of London just across the water, and we stare at the dome as she asks 'What happens there?' and you say: 'worship'. And she asks: 'What's worship about? What does it create and distribute?' And you pause because that's a good question – and because for many years, our lives have been dominated by the other two institutions: politics and economics, the state and the market, the logic of power and the logic of wealth. The state is us in our collective capacity. The market is us as individuals.

And the debate has been, and my goodness are we been bombarded with it: which is more effective? The left tends to favour the state. The right tends to favour the market. And there are endless shadings in between.

But what this leaves out of the equation is a third phenomenon of the utmost importance. The state is about power. The market is about wealth. And they are two ways of getting people to act in the way we want. Either we force them to – the way of power. Or we pay them to – the way of wealth.

But there is a third way and to remind ourselves we have to imagine first that we have total power, and then we decide to share it with nine others. How much do you have left? It's 1/10 of what you had when you began. And if you have ten thousand pounds to hand, and you decide to share it with nine others, you are left with 1/10 of what you had when you began.

But now suppose that you decide to share, not power or wealth, but love, or friendship, or wisdom, or skills and talents, or knowledge, with nine others. How much do you have left? Not less, in fact, much more; perhaps even 10 times as much. Because love, friendship, knowledge, wisdom, skills and love are things that only exist by virtue of us sharing them. With these, the more I share, the more I have. If I win, you also win. And that has huge consequences.

Wealth and power, economics and politics, the market and the state, are arenas of *competition*, whereas these, what you might call relational engagements, or as we tend to call them in places such as this, covenants, are arenas of *co-operation*.

Where do we find these covenantal goods like love, friendship, wisdom and trust? They are born, not in the state, and not in the market, but in marriages, partnerships, families, congregations, fellowships, communities, even in society, if we are clear in our minds that society is something different from the state. And, in Companies - like yours.

Covenants are different from contracts. In a contract, two or more individuals, each pursuing their own interest, come together to make an exchange for mutual benefit. So there is the commercial contract that creates the market, and the social contract that creates the state.

A covenant is something different. In a covenant, two or more individuals, each respecting the dignity and integrity of the other, come together in a bond of love and trust, to share their interests, sometimes even to share their lives, by pledging their faithfulness to one another, to do together what none can achieve alone. Many of us have sealed a covenant in marriages and partnerships. Or to put it slightly differently: a contract is about interests. A covenant is about identity. It is about you and me coming together to form an 'us'. That is why contracts *benefit*, but covenants can *change and even transform us and our lives*.

That inquisitive child might spot us leaving here today, asking, 'What are they creating and making happen?' Can we let her know that these all belong to a Company. And they are called that because that's what they are trying to be, good Company to each other, not giving up on each other, but trying to bring the best out of everyone, and also working to be good Company to the large City they have been in for some years, not giving up on people who need some support there, some friendship, some resource. The more they share their company and all they thankfully have, the more they become, not consumers or competitors, but citizens, the sort of company we so badly need in a fracturing world being shaped by some gladiatorial individuals with high self-esteem and low self awareness, many of them praying it seems the opposite of the Lord's prayer, that it might be on earth as it is in hell.

The skills, gifts and resource sitting in this Cathedral now are significant and, please God, poised to be offered to those who are struggling and those who need some belief in them. How best to do this? How can we counter this world's destructive illusions at the moment without ourselves becoming disillusioned? Well, there it was just now in Christ's song of beatitude that reminds us that this world will never be a blessing until we understand that God has given us a great gift, our being, and what we are asked to give

back in return for that is our becoming, who we become, and he lays out where we should be heading, blessed, he says, are those with spirits who know they aren't yet complete, those who live with loss and its distillations, those whose ego doesn't take over, and those with some mercy in them, those who believe that there is something called righteousness, who want justice not just law, those who make peace, and those who get put down and injured because they believe all this to be urgent truth. And when asked later what is most important of all, he sings the song back with its simple refrain: love, love with everything you have, love God, love your neighbour. This will make you good company in this world. And this will make you a good Company for this city.

We all need each other more than we like to admit. There are many who need you right now, some you'll know, and many you won't, but they are there. I pray that you will continue the ancient and noble tradition of the liveries, coming alongside as good and hopeful company for them to continue their lives with some blessing in it. Let's put ourselves in gear again and seek out those we can share our own blessings with, in a covenant of some kindness. And now, right now. Because, as Evelyn Waugh once said, the saddest words in the English language are 'too late'.