

The balance of justice and mercy

The Rt Revd Nicholas McKinnel

High Sheriff of Devon 2023-24

Devon is a large county with the great mass of Dartmoor at its centre and I have spent much of this year circumnavigating it en route to one destination or another. At each venue during my year of office I have been privileged to enjoy a whole range of encounters and experiences.

Reflecting on that year, my first observation is one of surprise at how under-resourced our criminal justice system appears to be. It is dispiriting to hear judges having to apologise to juries for the failures of IT and video links, or to find prison governors powerless to upgrade the inadequate facilities offered to their residents. There seem to be serious staffing shortages across the system and delays across the board worryingly impede justice. We hear plenty about the struggles of other public bodies like the NHS and education sector but there are few advocates for the criminal justice system – which may be where High Sheriffs have a contribution to make.

Within that slightly depressing context my second observation is of the hard work, the expertise and the compassion of all whom I met. That includes police officers often picking up some of the most unpleasant tasks in society, magistrates doing their best to be fair to victim and accused, judges in their lonely task, and the statutory and voluntary agencies working to help ex-offenders.

I took a particular interest in the rehabilitation of prisoners because the transition to the outside world is



Shire Reeve meets Portreeve; with Katherine Pugh, 1,203rd Portreeve of Ashburton, a town where the office is uniquely retained through an Act of Parliament

a vulnerable part of the system and often hard for prisoners to negotiate. With release on a Friday (at least until recently) and often with little money and no home to return to, it is small wonder that many ex-offenders are tempted to go back to the sort of activities that got them into trouble in the first place.

'Bring back Sure Start,' was the response of a family judge when I asked what one thing would make the biggest difference to their caseload. So many of the problems they encountered on a daily basis, they explained, came back to inadequate parenting and the lack of a secure home, with statistics regularly evidencing the



At HMP Exeter with Chris Taylor and Director of Services Tina Parker, both of Pact (Prison Advice and Care Trust)

high percentage of those in prison who were brought up in care. I found some brilliant examples of early intervention by the Youth Justice Service, but we are all now aware of the lifelong effect of those crucial early years of home life.

My final observation is simply that the law, properly upheld and administered, alone stands between us and the arbitrary rule of the dictator or the violence of the mob. The balance of justice and mercy is deeply rooted in the Christian heritage of our Western society with our respect for the value of all people but that will always be fragile. We need a healthy and robust legal system, and it has been an honour to be able to observe it over the last year.



Presenting a High Sheriff's Award to the volunteers of the Museum of Policing in Devon and Cornwall at its opening in Tavistock Photo: Museum of Policing in Devon & Cornwall (MOPIDAC)



The Severn Class Plymouth lifeboat with Cadet Daisy, Chairman Richard Benjafield and Coxswain Simon Jeffery