

## From sanctity to humanity

by Robert Cotton – February 2019

Guildford Shakespeare Company have delighted audiences in this church on nine previous occasions. Yet this year should prove discomforting and challenging. *Measure for Measure* is a play that is shot through with allusions to stories from the Bible. Perhaps the most poignant is the parable that Jesus told about the confident Pharisee and the gentle tax-collector who knew his fallenness and fallibility. In that parable, we expect to honour the idealistic, pure Pharisee, but finish by recognising the value of gracious, honest humility. A similar movement, from sanctity to humanity, occurs on numerous occasions in this play. Of what use are high ideals if they cannot deal with unexpected opportunities for sin? Ideals are of little worth if they cannot guide us to behave well when we have power over others. Ideals are of no earthly use if they do not help us with the contrariness of our desires. Even the godly St Paul notes that we often “do what we do not want to do, and do not do what we want to do”. That is normal for humans, and deserves sympathy and understanding. It only becomes hypocrisy when we choose to blind ourselves to our conflicted behaviour.

So, in *Measure for Measure* we see how some lose their principles, yet develop a more worthwhile moral character that is reliable in conflicting circumstances. Those who take the moral life too seriously are unbending, dangerous and, in the end, rather inhuman. Fury is reserved for the one who protects himself by permanent superficiality, criticising others, jesting, never taking anything that seriously. An indictment on much that we read in the media today!

I am not sure, if Shakespeare were alive today living in Guildford, that he would be a regular attendee at Holy Trinity services. But I like to think that he would recognise some of what *Measure for Measure* portrays in the life of the parish here. On the spectrum between Saints and Sinners, this play points us to the great worth of those who, having been buffeted by trials, have learnt honesty, humility, grace and compassion.

Guildford Shakespeare Company is a real gift to the local community – always exciting, creative and entertaining. This year, they will stir us deeply, provoking and disturbing us. So much the better if we leave here a little less sure of ourselves, and a little more human.