

23rd August 2021

Surety

"Save me, oh, save me, from the candid friend."

George Canning, New Morality (1821)

In the world of finance, "a surety" is a guarantee which involves a promise by someone to assume responsibility for the debt of a borrower if the borrower defaults. The surety bond, therefore, protects the lender against losses, because they are "sure" to have their debt repaid in full, no matter what. The Bible, in the Book of Proverbs, warns against entering into such an arrangement if you don't know people well enough: "He that is surety for a stranger shall smart for it." The third Delphic Maxim from the Temple of Apollo in ancient Greece goes further: "Surety brings ruin".

There were one hundred and forty-seven Delphic Maxims, said to have been delivered by the god Apollo's Oracle at Delphi, and therefore deemed to have come from the god himself. Why, then, would this one be found on the podium as one of the top three out of such a wide field?

As a parish minister, in my hospice chaplaincy and fundamental to my counselling, was the question "How do you care for yourself when you are caring for others?" There are many facets to that, but one of the most important was learning not to stand as "surety" for other people's needs. What I mean by that is this: in ministry, chaplaincy or counselling, for example, you can become weighed down by other people's burdens. Or, indeed, you might be inclined to go further than George Canning's "candid friend" and feel inclined to give advice, to be a rescuer, or solver of their problems. What happens, however, is that you are then attempting to live their lives for them, thus increasing the pressure on yourself.

The truth is that we have enough to live with in our own lives without trying to be completely responsible for someone else's. I cannot and should not stand as "surety" for the needs of others. They have to deal with life for themselves, perhaps with my help, but ultimately being personally responsible. In this, the Delphic Oracle is bang on! We should neither abrogate our responsibility onto someone else, nor take someone's responsibility on our own shoulders. "Surety brings ruin". And that ruin might do damage to you as well as to those for whom you care.

A prayer for today

Lord, as I help others care for themselves, help me to care for my life too. Amen