

Ordination of Priests 2010

Today, Trinity Sunday, is a Sunday cast in mystery and wonder, when we with feelings of awe seek to raise our eyes and try and join Jacob and Moses and Isaiah and Ezekiel and others of mystical vision in the Old Testament with Stephen and Paul and John and others from the New Testament who saw heaven opened and glimpsed an unforgettable sight of the glory of God, revealed in dream, or vision or reality, convincing them that God is in this place and that life changes here, in this moment, because revelation has brought conviction and new sight. Not that Jacob and Moses and Isaiah and Ezekiel and Stephen and Paul and John and others were not men of God before, but because they had their eyes opened wider to the majesty and wonder of the Father, or of the Son or of the Holy Spirit or of all three persons in one God. The Trinity, the fullness of God expressed for us to wrestle with and come to know and worship, in truth, in love, in adoration. Sometimes people wonder why in a Parish like St John's we carry the book of the Gospels into the centre of the Church and surround it with actions and words and song. Its easy really, tonight we have taken our oldest priest, who was ordained 64 years ago this day and we have given him the book of the Gospels to read, we have sent with him our youngest people to carry the cross for him and to shed light on the page and we have said to these four people: "Put the Gospel in our midst tonight that we can hear the very

words of Jesus speak to each of us and we shall listen and we shall praise God in alleluia when you have finished" . Of course we didn't need to do that – I could have read the words, "You must be born from on high" from here, but it is just our little, eccentric way of saying – these words are really important to us, these are the words of Jesus and so have greater authority for us than any other words we shall hear tonight, when we hear the Gospel read we are listening to Jesus, we are in our own way raising our hands and pointing to the one who saves, a lovely and meaningful thing to do.

It is true that ordination to the priesthood does not confer new sight or increased holiness of life, but it demands a fresh conviction, a renewed commitment, not because we are suddenly raised a few notches in the experience of the Christian life, but because from this day more will be demanded of the five new priests who will accept the calling and laying on of hands. And so you will need support and encouragement by word and prayer and action as increased demands are laid upon you. I do not say where that demand will come from, whether from within yourself, from the Church or from the Holy Spirit, perhaps it is from all three, but the calling to the priesthood is not something that anyone should take on lightly or live through without the close fellowship of others. I want to give you three texts, three corresponding pictures

and three related little pointers to aspects of the priest's life. This is not an overview of priestly identity or work or how it relates to being a deacon or bishop or any other authorised ministry, but they touch on keys areas that test and tempt the priest who is unwary and on the things that can destroy the essential joy and huge sense of privilege that ordination to the priesthood brings.

Everything is in threes in this sermon. One text from each of the three readings:

The first text is from our Exodus reading tonight and is simply this: "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." These are words from God to Moses. The object that I want to show you is this: A copy of the litany. This was produced fifty years ago, it is illustrated and illuminated by the hand of an artist, and was produced as an offering of love. The litany, that we shall sing a form of in a minute, is a repetitive form of prayer; these days it is rarely used, but is part of the Ordination service and is generally sung. Adrian will lead us in it in a few minutes from now. We sing the responses and do join in and sing. Even in the shortened form that we use in this service its repetition is obvious and deliberate. Much of the life of the priest involves endlessly repeating similar actions and words in such a way that they do not become a meaningless routine. I generally celebrate holy communion five times a week, the priest if he or she is wise grounds the devotional life in the daily office, standard prayers and phrases, familiar psalms and

patterns of devotion are the day to day diet fulfilling the priest's need to stand on holy ground. I make no apology for emphasising this, for every priest in this church has known the pain that comes when we neglect of our life of prayer. But retaining it as special is not easy. Why labour over something that is repetitive and routine? Because by labouring you are being attentive and acknowledging the fact that you are standing on holy ground, that others are relying on you being a person of prayer and that it is your duty to be there. These are old-fashioned ideas: expectation, duty, being relied upon, even the concept of the holy place the holy ground. But I know to my cost, and many priests would agree with me, that if you are motivated in your devotional life by what you feel like doing, rather than what you should be doing, you will swiftly find that your busyness will drive away your sense of God as a daily presence with you. You must give unhurried time to prayer; labour over the routine, be attentive to the repetitive, mark the silence with adoration and the space with a desire for the holiness, the set-apartness of God, and the feeling and the knowledge of God's presence will be with you too.

My second text is from the Epistle, from 2nd Corinthians 15: "He died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them." My second object is this: A first day cover of the World Cup in 1966 with the "England Winners" banner across the top. I was eleven when I got this and I thought I had

been given an absolute treasure. Here was an England football side on top of the world and I had what would become a priceless souvenir of the event. I am not even interested in football and wasn't then, I was a child-stamp collector and had loads of first day covers, but this was to me one of great value. Actually there were so many produced and so many people felt as I did about it that no one has ever thrown one away so there are still tens of thousands of them about and you can get one on e-bay for about three pounds fifty, even forty-four years on, not that I would sell this one – even if it were worth a hundred times that because it has a different kind of value, it is nostalgic to a certain time in my life, it is linked to other things like the person who gave it to me. But we know that values of things are relative and priesthood is no different. It has a value, but not necessarily the one that it is usually accorded.

The priest has been described as “nothing, but all things” ; nothing in that she or he is the servant of all and in this sense the status that is accorded to clergy is counter-productive and allows us to get big headed unless we are very careful. Becoming ordained can be seen as some kind of pinnacle of aspiration to serve God and the priest is greater than the deacon and the bishop at the top, our names go on plaques, our photographs in vestries, we get the best seats and the best places in the processions. We are the leaders! Well actually not according to the Ordinal, the description in the service that we are experiencing tonight, no, we are messengers,

watchmen, shepherds, stewards, servants, we fulfil key roles in church life; but our sense of being all things is not in terms of status, it is in terms of function, because we are privileged to be given a responsibility for guiding and caring for others; living in a constant state of calling as a living sacrament. We are reconcilers, representatives; declaring absolution, presiding at holy communion, uniting in marriage, comforting the dying, welcoming the young, opening the Scriptures to the searcher after truth; we are all things because we can and do rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. We are the Simon of Cyrene who is taken from the crowd and represents the crowd, but carries the cross for Christ and so stands in his place too, but then lays the cross down as Jesus himself takes it up, embraces it, that we, none of us might live for ourselves, but for him who died and was raised for us. We are left with the splinters – they mark the priest – they are the symbol of your privilege, a sign of your weakness and they remind you that you are nothing, except what you are in Christ and what he is calling to be and say and do in the days that lie ahead.

My third text is from the Gospel: ‘Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ My third object is this: One of the original drawings made by Evie Hone the stained glass artist who designed our St

Columba window. A working drawing, or cartoon, gives an insight into the thought and planning of an artist as they contemplate the finished article in their minds. It is work in progress and has an impressionist feel about it. This also demonstrates the place that a priest frequently is found to be in. Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, he was unsure of himself and he was unsure of the person he was coming to speak with, He desired to know more and Jesus spoke to him in ways that we have dwelt on ever since. He spoke of the work of the Holy Spirit and the way he comes and goes, unseen though heard, felt but impossible to pin down. The priest has the privilege of being with people who for all kinds of reasons are at that point of new life, of re-birth; at that transition, that point where things in someone's life are being reconciled after days, maybe after months of transition, perhaps even turmoil. Christ is resolving something in someone's life, he is bringing change and it may be change that is involving pain, or decision, or joy or freedom or release from a kind of imprisonment. The priest is so

often in the transition stage, at the point of change, of discovery, of helping someone to see – at the point of encounter – it is a wonderful place to share with a congregation or a group within it, a family or an individual – a moment when hope dawns and something new is sure to happen. It hasn't come into focus yet, but the light and the colour is all there and the priest can step away and praise God with tears of joy, just like a midwife really; so important at the birth, but ready to slip into the background as their job is done.

Three things: be attentive and careful and value the routine; remember that you are nothing, but all things, you take up the cross for another and you lay it down again, but only in relation to what Christ has done and is doing for you; live thankfully and positively through the times of change with others and rejoice in the new life that comes to them and through them to you too.

Be diligent, bear the cross, live the life of the Spirit and you will be blessed and others will be blessed through you.