

Sermon giving at the Ordination to the Priesthood of the Revd Jeremy Cavanagh on Sunday, 25 September 2022 by the Bishop of London

Well Jeremy I suspect that over many years you have pondered your calling to the priesthood. I would not be surprised that you, like many, have ask the question “What on earth is a priest for?”

Now the priesthood of the ordained is no different from the priesthood of the whole people of God. God calls his people to follow Christ, and forms us into a royal priesthood, a holy nation, to declare the wonderful deeds of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvellous light.

The ordained priesthood focuses and represents this priesthood of all the baptised. A priest is what he or she is because of what the church itself is called to be and what Christ for ever is.

Yet in another way, an ordained priest stands apart. We are people who don't quite fit the rules. Priests fascinate and make people nervous. Before the pandemic I was crammed like a vertical sardine into a Central Line tin can, known as the tube, nose to nose with my fellow commuters, each of us desperately trying to avert our gaze from the eyes only inches from our own, jealously guarding the smallest bit of personal space, that's when the biggest challenges come when I am asked what are you for? We carry hopes and longings, projections and transferences.

But what are we for? What are we paid to do? Is it a job or isn't it? What does it mean publicly and officially to stand both as part of an organised religion and at the same time for the

contradiction of the cross? And how do we come to be here at all - for sometimes, the experience of vocation is that it happens somewhat against our will, or at least without our fully realising what is happening to us. Perhaps ordained priesthood becomes more elusive the more we inhabit it - you are ordained priest in about an hour. You spend a lifetime becoming one.

Our liturgy today tells us that Priests are called to be messengers, watchmen and stewards of the Lord and most importantly they are there to tell the story of God's love.

As Christians, whether ordained or lay, we are all called to serve as heralds of Christ's Kingdom as the prophet Isaiah says to be witnesses. Witnesses to the hope of what God did in the past through Christ which points to a future without death or suffering and which leaps into our present in such a way that we become part of that transforming love and hope. We become part of God's generous love offering not just a glimpse of humanity but actions of deep compassion. Which says that God is present in his suffering world, that God's love is transforming the world and that the best is yet to come.

If we are to be witnesses to God's purpose of love and hope we need to be people who also experience this reality. As we ordain you today to be priest first and foremost, you are called to follow Christ to grow your relationship with him. By being deeply rooted in God we are better resourced to share his concerns and compassion for all he has made.

Priests are called to be messengers, watchmen and women and stewards of the lord. In the words of Isaiah to be a sentinel.

Gregory the Great used the theme of God's ministers as sentinel to attempt to describe what sort of ministers we need to be, and how we might see what this Gospel says to the people we serve. He said this -

"A sentinel always selects a high vantage point in order to be able to observe things better. In the same way, whoever is appointed as a sentinel for a people should live on the heights so that he can help his people by having a broad perspective."

This seems to me to be hugely significant for our ministry today. The death of Her Majesty The Queen has not just raised sorrow at her parting or thanksgiving for her life of service, but it has also raised questions in our communities. It was a pleasure to be a chaplain to the queue with the Faith Team last Sunday and I was aware that people's conversations reflected a wider searching of meaning and of questions of faith.

To be a sentinel – a contemplative watchman for the Lord; it is not to detach yourself from the world, but to stand on the heights and survey the world in all its joys and horrors, interpreting the world to the church and the church to the world, warning of danger when everyone is feeling safe, and proclaiming the victory of Christ when everything looks and feels defeated.

Priests are called with all God's people to tell the story of God's love. It has been said that storytellers are heart teachers. They unfold roads before us and behind us. They show us where the rough places are and where we might find

good water. They accompany us as we walk through our own stories. Stories are filled with words and words have power.

Story tellers are those who build relationships – earning the right to be able to tell their story and the story of God’s love.

It has been said that Churches don’t need sophisticated resources to grow; they need high quality relationships. (Bob Jackson *Hope for the Church: Contemporary studies for Growth*. Church House Publishing 2002 p54).

In being called to be messengers and story tellers, Priests need to build relationships with others and to build relationships with others outside our churches – in every part of our communities. Sharing with others what God means to us - to tell the story of God’s love.

And when we encounter others we need to do more than to talk of God’s love, we must demonstrate in action and with integrity and with generosity. When Jesus was moved with compassion he told the story of God’s love in word and in action - the lepers, made outcasts by their disease, were restored by his healing touch; the woman outcast because of her blood disorder was made whole by touch, those who were hungry were fed, the alien was welcomed, those lost like sheep without a shepherd were found.

If we are to talk of justice we must act justly, if we are to talk of mercy we must act with mercy, if we are to talk of healing and wholeness we must act to enable others to find it and if we are to talk of love which is generous we must offer it to others.

Whatever the specifics of your job description in priestly ministry, and they may be many and varied and will change over time certainly, you have this focus which goes beyond the specific actions of ministry, to character and personhood; to be a person whose whole life makes the life of Christ a reality for each person with whom your life comes in contact, to be a sign which is effective, a person who offers a likeness of the priesthood of Christ making his loving reconciling grace present through you – story tellers of God’s love.

You may not remember the charge I gave you last year but I will finish with the words I finished my charge with, words from the former Archbishop Michael Ramsay said in one of his ordination charges, published years ago in “the Christian Priest Today”

“Put yourself near God every day with the people in your heart. God, myself and people, being with Him for them, and with them for Him.” (p18)

I pray that we may always be story tellers of God’s love.