

ORDAINED MINISTRY

There's an old Christian tradition that God sends each person into this world with a special message to deliver, with a special song to sing for others, with a special act of love to bestow. No-one else can speak my message, or sing my song, or offer my act of love. These are only entrusted to me.

Those words help us to be reminded of God's call to each one of us and of our responsibility to God.

It all started at creation. Adam & Eve was given the abundance and perfection of creation with one constraint – the tree of life. They ate the fruit and became aware of their nakedness, felt shame and hid from God. It's been downhill ever since.

They heard God walking in the garden – God called – and he's been doing it ever since. God calls all people – no matter what their status or creed. Because all human beings are made in the image of God they are called to become the people of God.... Though we are tainted by our sinfulness, God's wonderful grace and love offers us all this common vocation. God leaves everyone free to refuse this call; but the call is there for all without exception.

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But we are not called alone. Expressing that message, singing that song, offering that act of love will not only bring the most profound fulfilment; it will also be there for the freeing or the enrichment of others. A call is always about relationships and community.

A well-known Christian writer wrote: "Vocation is about the purpose of life, about finding the place and the people, in you and around you, to which you are being called so that you can be completely yourself, can become whole, and can be the very best you are capable of being.

For the past two weeks, you have been thinking about the ministry of lay people – called together with a purpose. Today I come to think with you about the ministry of those who are ordained – and their specific task within the whole. As the people of God we are called to make music for the world. It is a music that sounds freedom in all the corners of the earth. It is the music of Jesus Christ – God's gift of life for the world.

The pastors of God's people are called to help the church enthral the world with the sound of Christ. Sometimes they are like the person who sweeps the floor making the place ready for the performance. Other times they are like the restorer, who skilfully repairs the instruments when they have been damaged. All of the time they are like the conductor whose overriding passion is to draw the best sound from each person, and to bring the sounds of each uniquely gifted person into some order, so that together, in time and in tune, the people of God can play the score of God's mercy, truth and goodness, to a world battered by it's own noise but starved of the sound of God.

So what is the significance of ordaining people? Why does the church do it? How are we to understand the role of priest? These, and others are questions for us to think about, both today and on Wednesday – the priestly ministry of leading and shaping, guiding, and forming God's priestly people – for we are all described as a royal priesthood. I Peter 2/5

Over recent years there have been major changes in the ordained ministry. It was not long ago that those training for ordination were mainly young men destined to work in parishes as stipendiary clergy for the rest of their lives. Today things are very different. No longer are colleges exclusively filled with young men. For several years in this diocese, the number of women training for ordination has exceeded 60% of the total. Also, colleges and courses train men & women of all ages for a variety of priestly vocations in hospitals, prisons, schools, colleges, religious communities and the armed forces, as well as the familiar parishes and newer team ministries. Large numbers of people have a vocation to self-supporting ministry, who have a focus of ministry in two places – parish and work.

There are a number of images that have helped to form a picture of what being ordained implies and gives us some *conditions* to help define the identity of a priest. The trail begins very clearly from the Scriptures, but Gregory the Great, who was the sixth-century missionary Pope who sent Augustine to England.

He speaks of a priest as a ‘mother’ giving birth and nurturing life. Motherhood is a rich image for ministry with deeply biblical roots. Paul spoke two or three times of his work in those terms eg. We were gentle among you like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children...(I Thess 2/7)

The yearning to see new life emerge, the dedication to see it grow healthily are hallmarks of motherhood. In that vein, a priest is asking “What are the conditions needed for the health of the church? What is needed for the birth and growth of people into Christ-like life? How can it be provided?

Gregory balances the image of ‘mother’ with that of ‘father’, who shows love in complimentary sorts of ways. Giving of responsibility, learning to use tools, mend bikes & learn to drive. What are the conditions for the growth of the church into maturity and adulthood? How can Christians be stretched to serve God in the ministry to which he is calling them?

Perhaps Gregory’s favourite image is that of ‘physician’. With great insight, he skilfully diagnoses the way that Christian growth can be impeded and suggests treatment that goes to the heart of the matter. Gregory was keen to attend to any ill health in the people, any attitude or action that may restrict a person’s growth into the life of Christ. The health of the church depends upon the health of its members. We are so often told today that healthy churches are growing churches.

He also uses the image of ‘navigator’. He describes the pastoral calling to be “with people when they face a storm in the soul, in which the vessel of the heart is ever tossed by gusts of feeling, and driven without ceasing hither and thither, so that it is wrecked by transgressions in word and deed, as though by rocks that meet it..” Much of his advice to pastors is about helping people to find their way through the difficult times of life, to steer their way through temptation and testing, to keep their sights set on the destination that God is calling them to.

It’s a good image for a priest, recognising the Christian existence is never stationary. We are always moving. A ‘navigator’ is similar to a ‘shepherd’. Steering us through the challenges of life, leading us to places of nourishment and then to the next place.

The responsibilities of a priest are set out in the Ordinal – the service of ordination. This uses the phrase “you are to be messengers, watchmen and stewards of the Lord.

These images & phrases give us some *conditions* to help us define a priest. The *characteristics* that define the life of a priest are *worship & prayer*. The consequences are *holiness, reconciliation and blessing*.

Isaiah 6 gives us a good picture. Whilst worshipping in the temple he was caught up into a vision of the Lord. Overwhelmed by the holiness of God he called out “Woe is me! I am lost for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips. One of the angelic host who were ministering to him took a burning coal from the altar, touched Isaiah’s mouth with it and declared his sin was blotted out. Then Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord “Whom shall I send, who will go for us. “Here am I, send me” Isaiah responded and then heard the Lord send him out to the people with God’s word in his heart.

While *worshipping*, Isaiah hears the *word* of the Lord and utters his *prayer* to the Lord. He is *reconciled* to God in a new way and, receiving the *holiness* that God provides for him, offers his life to God and is sent out to bring the *blessing* of God to his people, even though it is a blessing that comes first through judgement.

Those called to be priests are to be *worshipping* people, shaped by God’s *word* of truth and sustained by lives of *prayer*. These characteristics of priestly life will lead to the fruit of *holy* lives that bring *reconciliation* and *blessing* to God’s people

Personal story of ministry in the street.

Ordination doesn’t **make** you clever, or special or holy.

I was there **to pray**.

It wasn’t just that I was **there**, because that would get us thinking that we need to be everywhere.

I was there, recognised as someone who would pray.

Stipendiary clergy are not paid for what they do, but for what they don’t do, in order to pray.

I remember talking to a colleague who was approaching retirement.

The conversation was about what he would have changed in his ministry if he had his time again – would he have been more evangelistic, challenging, visited more, chosen different sorts of parishes, sought greater responsibility, even high office. No, he said, I think I would just want to pray more.

I love the phrase that Rob Parson’s says in “60 minute father”, is never uttered on a fathers’ deathbed

“I wish I had spent more time at the office”.

But it can be said for the clergy I wish I’d spent more time saying the office, which is the term for the formal daily prayers.

God calls you to prayer & worship– but the church will do all in its’ power to make you busy and create an anxiety in you to do God’s work for him.

We like to be busy, it makes us feel good!

“I know you’re busy but...” We like it – it’s better than “I know you’re not very busy....”

I’ve had circular letters from Christian organisations that say “To the busy pastor.

It’s the primacy of prayer that leads to adventure.