

You are a priest forever

Sermon on the occasion of The Rev'd Ken Water's first Mass at St George's Methwold 3rd July 2011.

+ *In Nomine*

I guess this is inevitably one of those advice sermons along the lines of the famous shooting poem 'never, never let your gun, pointed be at anyone' – an occasion where the old dog teaches the new dog old tricks!

Today is filled with joy as we celebrate with a new priest as he presides at Eucharist for the first time– as he does for the very first time what he is ordained to do and will do for the rest of his life. Yesterday at your ordination Ken, Bishop Stephen along with the college of priests laid hands on you in an ancient ceremony. Through the action of the Holy Spirit in the laying on of hands, you received the power to absolve, consecrate and bless – the three particularities of priesthood. You have been changed forever. You have been set aside by the Church, for the church – consecrated to be for the People of God and to be a priest – not just for as long as you feel like it - but forever. You are, in Gregory the Great's words: *a servant of the servants of God* – remember that the diaconate remains at the heart of priestly ministry.

Indeed Gregory had this advice for those embarking on a life of priestly service:

Whosoever, then, desires to obtain priesthood, not for the pomp of elation but for doing good, let him first measure his own strength with the burden he is to undergo...and also approach it with fear, even if he thinks himself sufficient for it.

Bad luck, Ken. There's no turning back now!

And of course none of us is sufficient for it in our own strength but only through the help of God who has called us to share in His apostolic mission

and given us this wonderful gift of priesthood. And it is a gift because despite the sheer hard work, priesthood brings great joy – the wonder of presiding at Eucharist can never be equalled. We are called into a share in Christ's own priestly ministry – reconciling, blessing and being given the power and the permission to make Christ present in the sacrament of the altar. Michael Ramsey said this in his amazing little book of Ordination retreat addresses called **The Christian Priest Today**:

The priest is called to reflect the priesthood of Christ and to serve the priesthood of the people of God and to be one of the means of grace whereby God enables the church to be the church.

So we are called to be a means of God's grace to those we serve. How amazing is that? And what grave responsibility.

Last week I mentioned Jesus' threefold commission to Peter in John 21 – *Tend my lambs; feed my sheep*. Later Peter himself advises his elders – the forerunners of the order of priests:

Tend the flock of God that is in your charge. [1 Pet 5:2].

New priests are charged with these solemn words: *Remember always with thanksgiving that the treasure now to be entrusted to you is Christ's own flock, bought by the shedding of his blood on the cross.*

And are exhorted to *Be a pastor after the pattern of Christ the Great Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep.*

A priest's life follows the pattern of the Master's. It is the way of the Cross.

So in order to fulfil the demands as well as the joys of this calling a priest must be, before all else, a person of prayer. Ken ...*be marinated in prayer.*

Faithfulness in prayer will undergird, strengthen and form your priestly life –

you know this already. Michael Ramsey speaks of *being with God with your people on your heart* as you offer Eucharist and faithfully pray the Divine Office. As priests we are called to *be near to Jesus, with Jesus and in Jesus*. To adore Him. To be still in the Presence of the Lord. To pray with Thomas in all humility and awe: *My Lord and My God*

I mentioned the three 'particularities' of priesthood – to absolve, to consecrate and to bless. All three are grounded in the Sacraments – especially the Holy Eucharist at which the priest presides.

In the Sacraments – Baptism, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Anointing, the priest is called upon to declare God's healing forgiveness and peace. A priest is ordained to be *mediator ad Deum* – mediator before God. The priest mediates God's forgiveness through the ministry of Confession and Absolution, preaching the Gospel of God's reconciling love and bearing witness to the ministry of the reconciliation wrought once for all on Calvary and freely available to all who are penitent. Jesus said in handing on this reconciling power to His apostles: *Receive the Holy Spirit – whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven, whose sin you retain, they are retained.*

You are called to consecrate...to make holy. At the Holy Eucharist, the priest is *in persona Christi* – through the action of the Holy Spirit the priest has the power to make the ordinary holy so that Christ can truly be among us ...just as Thomas acknowledged in that locked room after the Resurrection. It is one of the reasons why a new priest's hands may be anointed with Chrism at ordination. In taking, consecrating, breaking and distributing, the priest acts in Christ's name and not only in the name of the gathered congregation but of the Church universal – on earth and in heaven.

The Archbishop of Canterbury writes: *The priest is therefore in the business of – as we could put it – immersing in Christ's action the gifts and prayers and love of human beings. This cosmic church, realised through the Sacrament of the altar, is a far cry from the day-to-day experience of the church - you know -*

the frustration of Benefice rotas, interminable meetings of all sorts, diocesan paperwork in triplicate, the elusiveness of parish mole catchers, leaking roofs etc etc etc- but it transforms all the mundane stuff of daily life and makes it whole... and bearable!

And then there is blessing. The priest is ordained to mediate God's blessing on His people and to be a visible sign of that blessing. As I said earlier, priests are bearers of grace. They are called to guide and sanctify the faithful and to call down upon them God's blessing. In Old Testament times God commanded the priests, "*Bless the children of Israel, saying unto them, the Lord bless you, and keep you* [Numbers 6:23-27]. In blessing, the priest follows the example of our Saviour who blessed those who came to him for healing and simply to be in His presence. At the dismissal at the Eucharist the priest blesses the congregation with the sign of the cross in order that all may be strengthened and made holy to be Christbearers - to engage in Christ's mission in God's world.

Now this may all sound too much to live up to. But no...with God's help all things are possible. Remember last week I spoke about the very human, fallible Peter to whom Christ entrusted his church. Today we celebrate doubting Thomas' affirmation of Jesus as his Lord and God. They were all clay vessels and so are we - sinful and fallible. Yet God has called you Ken ... and me and Samuel and Angela and all priests ... and set us aside by the laying on of hands to watch for the signs of God's presence and activity in the world, to witness to Christ's redeeming love and to weave together God's story and ours through gathering the community around the altar. In this way we give expression to the priestly people of God and the priestly essence of the Church. The priestly life therefore begins, is grounded and ends in worship.

Ken ...rejoice and be glad in the One who has called and the One who is faithful - today as you preside at the altar for the first time - and every day. He chose you as His priest to bear fruit - fruit that will last. To go where He

leads, to be for His people and to celebrate His Presence. He has consecrated you to a life of dedication and holiness. He's called you - in the particularity of your personality - laid back Geordie sense of humour, jokes galore, wisdom, intelligence and sensitivity - to be His priest forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.