

## Sermon for Chrism Eucharist 7 April 2009 – Canon Robert Innes (Brussels)

To begin with I would like to thank Bishop David very much for inviting me down from Brussels to preach here in this great city of Paris and to the warm hospitality of Philip and the people of St. Michael's church.

A Belgian went up to a policeman in Paris and told him: "Look at this monkey; he came upon me in the park and has been trailing along with me ever since. What do you suggest I do with him?" "Well," said the policeman, "take him to the zoo." "That's a good idea", said the Belgian, "thank you for it." The next day, the policeman saw the Belgian, still with the monkey accompanying him. "Did I not tell you to take him to the zoo?" the policeman asked. "And indeed I did" the Belgian replied. "The monkey enjoyed himself no end making fun of all those other animals in cages. But today I thought he'd like some other form of entertainment, so I'm taking him to the cinema."

Is that a typically French joke about Belgian stupidity or is it about Belgian openness to strange creatures and an unwillingness to clamp them immediately behind bars. I'll leave you to think about it...

I have certainly experienced Belgium as a remarkably welcoming place to me as an Englishman, and I hope that those of you who come from a country that says *soixante dix* rather than *septante*, and *quatre-vingt dix* rather than *nonante*, can appreciate the sometimes weird but genuinely welcoming temperament of your little northern neighbour too.

We gather together today to share in the blessing of oils. As our Old Testament reading reminded us, oil has a long history of sacred use amongst the people of Israel. It was a sign of kingship – and oil is still used to anoint kings and queens at their coronation today. We Christians though look to, the Christ, 'the anointed one', King David's greater Son. For us, the three oils used in this service are intended by their symbolism to link us in one way or another to Jesus. Whether the oil of catechumens, or the oil of healing or the oil of Chrism – they are signs of being incorporated into Christ's body, baptized by his spirit and touched by his healing power. And I for one am glad that there is an increasing willingness across the whole of our church to use these symbols and signs, along with words, to demonstrate and encourage faith. We human beings are physical, fleshly people, and we need symbols and actions and drama, as well as words, to convey spiritual realities.

But as well as blessing the oils, this service has another purpose. From the 1950s the Chrism Eucharist has been used as an opportunity for the renewal of commitment to ministry. And so this week, in every Church of England diocese, ordained ministers, with Readers and authorised lay ministers gather with their bishop to renew their commitment to ministry.

Let me say at the outset that these kinds of occasions have the capacity to attract and to repel. For a lay person, the sight of lots of clergy all dressed up and sitting together can be encouraging, but it can also be offputting. As someone once said, 'clergy are like manure; spread thinly and used carefully they can sometimes do some good, but all piled up in one place they create a bad smell.' The suggestion of a separate caste of

priests who are somehow set apart and closer to God than the rest can feel excluding to those who are not part of the club.

It is therefore crucial to stress that it is **baptism**, not ordination, that is the common entry point of the church. It is by baptism and faith, that we are incorporated into the body of Christ. It is through baptism and faith that we are born anew into God's own family, a family which transcends the exclusiveness of blood ties, a family where all Christian people become our brothers and sisters. There is no such thing as a 'non-ordained' person in the body of Christ, because baptism is itself an ordination into the laos. "You", says St. Peter – addressing the whole church – "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."

And yet within Christ's body, particular ministries are needed, and have always been needed, to structure, animate and co-ordinate the church's life together. **Bishops** who act as regional leaders, who exercise oversight and are a symbol of unity. **Deacons** who are ordained to serve and build up the body of Christ and to care for those in need. And **presbyters**, or as they were called from the 4th century onwards 'priests'. My theology professor Dan Hardy taught us that the particular role of the presbyter or priest was to 'under-stand' or '**stand-under**' the church. It is about leading through service, holding the tension in a community, picking up the ball when it is dropped.

When I offered myself for full-time ministry I had two fears. The first fear was that becoming a vicar would distance me from people. I feared that wearing funny clothes and being closely associated with the strange institution of the church would make people wary of me. That fear proved completely groundless. To the contrary, I have found that being ordained has given me far more and far deeper conversations with people both inside and outside the church than I ever had before. My other fear was that I would be lonely. In my professional life I had always enjoyed being part of a team – whether as a team of young engineers maintaining electrical generating equipment, or as a business consultant working with others on new computer systems. But I was worried that the life of a vicar would be isolated. And that fear was correct. Often we clergy work on our own, or with a very small number of colleagues whom we may or may not have chosen. And so occasions like this gathering today are important. Because they bring us together at a key time of the year, to encourage and support one another, and to renew together our vision for the work of ministry.

Today I want to say three things about ministry. The first I owe to the eastern orthodox Metropolitan John Zizioulas whose writing has been very influential on my own understanding of ministry, and the second and third are from our gospel reading from St. Luke.

1. "**Ministry**", says Zizioulas, "**is primarily about relationships**".

Well, you might say, that's pretty obvious isn't it. But actually it hasn't always been obvious. Because at least within the Western tradition debates about ordination and ministry have started somewhere else. There have those who have thought that ministry was mainly about a special grace given to someone in ordination, about a change that takes place in someone's soul that as it were makes them a priest [ontological views]. Then there are others who have thought that ministry is mainly about a set of functions – preaching, leading, caring and so on that it is the job of the minister to do [functional views].

But in my experience neither of these are adequate. The fundamental thing that changes when someone is ordained is their **relationship** with the church and the church's witness to the world. We become ambassadors for Christ in a strong, representational sense. We are regarded as pastors by our congregations. We represent and lead our community in its central acts of worship. As a result of that, yes, we do pick up a series of functions and responsibilities. More than that, **because my identity as a person depends on my relationships**, it is true to say that I do become a different person. I am changed. But the fundamental thing is our relationship with our church community. We start to sense intuitively its joys and pains, we hold its tensions, we start to embody its identity. That of course is a great privilege and sometimes a costly burden.

This relational way of understanding ministry corrects two mistakes:

- the first mistake is that of those who suppose that ordained ministry is 'my' possession for me to do with as I think fit. The individualist or the maverick has simply not understood the deeply relationally embedded nature of it all.
- the second mistake is of those who suppose that they can have a calling to ordained ministry which is independent of the community of the church. Those who say to me (as an assistant director of ordinands) "I have a calling to be a priest, the problem is that I can't get the church to recognise it!" Ordination isn't a personal possession or a natural human right!

As Zizioulas says, "ministry is describable only in terms of the particular relationship into which it places the ordained...Ministry as a whole can be describable as a complexity of relationships within the church and in its relation to the world."<sup>1</sup>

## **2. The Ministry of Leadership and Leadership as Ministry**

Our gospel reading, gives us two deeply significant and contrasting comments on ministry. Two extraordinary reversals. First: incredible though it seems, the disciples around the table are arguing about which of them is the greatest. A meal, not just any meal but this Last Supper, which should, of course, have been about fellowship and friendship somehow gets turned into a debate about status. We know that Graeco-Roman meals had elaborate status conventions surrounding who was invited, who sat close to the host, and so on.<sup>2</sup> It could be that the disciples are reflecting on the table plan, and who has the best seats. So Jesus says to the disciples, "the Gentile kings exercise authority and call themselves Benefactors". For them, financial gifts, authority, and honour in the community are all bound together. For them patronage, prestige and public office are linked.

But he says, "it is not to be like that with you." Yes you may be benefactors. Yes you can and may be leaders. But your way of giving and your way of leading must be utterly transformed. When you give, do so as God gives – without expectation of reward or return. And when you lead you should be radically unconcerned with status. To be a leader isn't to be like the chief guest sitting in the best seat, it's to be like the waiter. Your leadership is exercised in serving the needs of others. "Turn", he says to them "from your concern with status, and instead have a comparable attentiveness to

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<sup>1</sup> John D. Zizioulas *Being as Communion* St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, 1985 page 220.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Joel B. Green NICNT Commentary, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1997 on Luke 22.

the needs of others.” It is interesting that Jesus memorably initiates a concept which so many business authors in our own time have re-discovered. Be a servant leader. Thus does Jesus reverse the link between leadership and status and replace it with a link between leadership and service.

### **3. The rewards of Ministry**

But it is perhaps his second and subsequent reversal which is more surprising. For, despite the failures and wrong attitudes of his disciples, he now exalts them. “You”, he says, “are those who have stood by me in my trials.” You are those who have faithfully endured with me. “And so I confer upon you a kingdom”. The apostles haven’t been very successful. Their attitudes have sometimes been hopelessly adrift. In fact they’ve sometimes looked more like clowns than kings. Yet they have stuck by Jesus in three years of ministry and they will receive their reward.

For us too ministry is often far from easy. The biographer A.N. Wilson once said that there is no occupation that he would rather have had than that of a 19th century Anglican clergyman. A little pastoral visiting, perhaps some research into botany, the social status accruing from being one of the few educated men in the village... Well, by contrast, I doubt whether any agnostic would look on the job of a 21st century priest with that kind of envy. Ministry today is tough.

- We live in a European society which has largely rejected institutional Christianity but yet is familiar enough with the Christian story not to want to hear it again.<sup>3</sup>
- We who work as ‘institutional professionals’ know the painful gap between the promise of our religion and the reality of its actual practice.
- In this diocese, we cope with the additional difficulties of language, of operating in foreign cultures and legal systems, of the challenge of establishing shared and owned traditions in our communities.

It is hard. And of course, sometimes we do get it wrong...

So, let us too take comfort and courage from Jesus words to his faithful disciples : “You are those who have stood with me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom.” As is often said, we are **not required to be successful, but to be faithful.**

**In Conclusion:** Ministry is primarily about relationships. We are commissioned to ‘stand under’ our communities, shaping by our godly influence the dynamics of church life so that they may conform more closely to the dynamics of the Spirit of God. This kind of servant ministry is deeply self-involving and costly, as it was for our Lord. But it carries its rewards, in this world and in the world to come. For we are involved in the building of the kingdom, we are engineers in realising God’s masterplan for the world – and what could be more fulfilling than that?

So may our worship today, and the vows we shall in a few moments take together, serve to build us up and strengthen our resolve to follow Christ in love and ministerial service over this Easter period and through the coming year. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> On this theme, see David Smith *Moving towards Emmaus: Hope in a time of uncertainty* SPCK, London, 2007.