

Addresses for the Ordination Retreat for the Manchester Diocese, June 2007

Talk One:

Will you be diligent in Prayer?

There was a Diary column in the Church Times
by a priest who thought himself young
but then found himself coming out with phrases like
'Well, in my day...'
'Well, when I was trained, and trained properly, mind you...'
'Well, when I was a curate...'

It's an age old problem
in that my wife's mother, back in the 1950s
when she was a parish worker in Sheffield,
was hectorred by her vicar
who excused every order with the preface,
'Well, when I was a curate in Goole...'

Leslie Hunter, the Bishop of Sheffield
was asked how, with such a high profile,
he was ever able to take a day off.
'I go to Goole,' he replied.

I've always thought that would make a wonderful limerick,
'When I was a curate in Goole,
we were fed on nothing but gruel,
we rose long before dawn
and with our teeth cut the vicar's lawn
and we never ever thought him a fool.'

I suppose I've reached that certain age
both in my life and in my ministry
when I'm tempted to pronounce on the past golden age
which was my day.
What can I say?
After twenty five years ministry,
after twenty five years ministry
I am absolutely appalled
how hopeless I am
at prayer.

There's really no excuse.
If I was newly ordained,
I could hope that I would improve,
find more time for prayer once I got the hang of things,
read edifying spiritual books,
prioritise my life and pray.

But after a quarter of a century of good intentions
I realise that unless a sea change comes along
things are not going to get much better.
And there's really no excuse,
no excuse at all.
'Will you be diligent at prayer,'
The Archbishop asked me at my ordination.
Tut, tut!

'Well, don't worry, you must be good at other things,'
I hear people say.
That doesn't comfort me at all,
since just as a teacher's chief work is to teach,
and a doctor's to heal,

a priest's chief work is to pray,
and I should be sacked because I am so bad at it.

'You're not that bad at all,' I hear others say,
'Hearing you pray is a spiritual experience.'
Well, I'm very pleased if that is so,
but it's nothing to do with me,
more to do with God
taking my impoverished words and thoughts
and breathing life into them,
a divine lone ranger
riding into churchtown
to sort out the mess that Wilbourne has made of it again.

'Oh come on,' someone else will say
'There must have been high points of prayer
in twenty five years ministry.
Don't be so hard on yourself,
focus on them.'

First of all, I would want to go far further back
than my ordination,
since prayer isn't just for clergy but for everyone.
A deacon, a priest is released from other things
to concentrate on prayer,
but it is not a solo activity.
His praying should be contagious,
and draw others into prayer.

And I would have to admit that
there have been odd moments,
glorious moments.
When I was just 11
and watched the mass funeral

of those poor Welsh children
suffocated by that Aberfan coal time,
my little boy's heart went out to them.
As they sung the hymn *Jesus lover of my soul*,
a hymn I had never heard before
especially as it was sung in Welsh,
I was so taken with the haunting tune
that I found the hymn in my father's English Hymnal
and played and played and played it on my recorder -
I must have driven my parents mad!

But I guess through the hymn
I felt in some inchoate way
that God was there in that pain,
and that in some mysterious way
I was allied with,
caught by the sorrowing heart of God.
Prayer as tuning in,
empathising with God's woundedness:
I often return to that,
or would do more often if only I had more time.

Then another memory from childhood,
watching my father, the priest,
say his prayers,
morning by morning,
evening by evening.
I always thought my father was bound
to be made the Archbishop of Canterbury
for such holiness
but he never was.
But that didn't seem to worry him.
Day after day,
even in the grottiest and most forlorn parishes,

and you have to remember we spent 12 years in East Hull,
day after day he prayed.
Sometimes I said Mattins with him,
since it gets a bit boring
if not schizo
responding to your own versicles.
O Lord open our lips...
And our mouth shall proclaim your praise.
On those occasions
I felt very proud,
sharing in this important business of prayer.

I found prayer very comforting at University.
College is a big step for any young person,
leaving home,
fending for yourself,
competing with academic excellence.
It can be overwhelming for some.
I remember praying
and feeling a tremendous warmth and reassurance.
And as the university years went by,
people I knew,
even those training for ministry,
were very scathing about prayer,
but I could never let go that prayer mattered.

R S Thomas, majestically as ever
catches the feeling
in the language of medieval chivalry.
The pray-er is cast as a knight,
a rather diffident knight;
his quest:
to rescue his beloved
a princess

imprisoned in a high tower;
diffident
because he is unsure
she is there at all.
'Prayers like gravel
Flung at the sky's
window, hoping to attract
the loved one's
attention. But without
visible plaits to let
down for the believer
to climb up,
to what purpose that far casement?
I would
have refrained long since
but that peering once
through my locked fingers
I thought that I detected
the movement of a curtain.'

My experience of prayer in ministry
is really a very poor show indeed.
My daily prayers, my daily bible reading
seems so often perfunctory.
But from time to time
I'll be reading some Bible text,
finding the prayer for the day,
and something will leap out at me,
and judge me, or inspire me,
or give me the stamina to start again.
And those moments make me realise
it's important to stick at it.

My last job disturbed my prayer life.
Much to my surprise
in 1991 I was made Archbishop's chaplain,
an ecclesiastical cross between
Bernard and Sir Humphrey
of Yes Prime Minister fame,
or playing Lewis to the Archbishop's Morse.

The day began at Bishopthorpe Palace
with prayer in the 13th century chapel.
There was usually just the three of us,
me, the Archbishop and the Press Officer,
taking turns to lead Mattins,
read the lessons
do the intercessions.
Having to pray before an Archbishop,
and not just any old archbishop,
but an archbishop called John Habgood,
brought me up short
and drove me to find the words.
Drove me to listen to his words,
words which seemed to have been long pondered
and found to have immense weight.
Drove me to listen to others words,
hymn writers, poets, novelists,
whose words I used,
learnt off by heart,
when my words were scarce.
There's a handful of hymns
which are immense prayers...

I daren't count up
how many retreats I had to organise.
This is my 17th ordination retreat -

I'm sure the penny will drop sooner or later.
After a couple of years as Archbishop's chaplain
I decided to restrict my retreat nights away
to twenty per year.
Because I didn't sleep well
I always used to get up early and steal into chapel
and just drink from the dark God-filled silence
and feel a tremendous quenching.
A lot of retreats were to do with those who were training,
and I used to watch the ordinands
who breezed into chapel
five minutes before Morning Prayer started,
who then looked superior to those
who tumbled in
two minutes before Morning Prayer started.
Some retreats involved the Senior Staff,
Bishops, Archdeacons, deans,
who also breezed in five minutes before.
Such retreats brought home
both my need for prayer
and that I wasn't the only one
whose practice was impoverished.
We all ought to be sacked.

That most prayerful of archbishops,
Michael Ramsey,
was asked how long he prayed every morning.
'Just, just, two minutes,' came the shocking answer.
'But, but, but, it takes me forty five minutes to get there.'
I'm comforted that such a spiritual giant
found the going hard.

And what of my present parish of Helmsley?
Our churches,

much like your churches where you will serve,
our houses of prayer
are precisely that,
places where prayer comes easily, cheerily,
places where prayer has been valid for centuries,
places where prayer is valid now.
Sometimes when I pray with people
I feel as if I drink from their goodness.
Helmsley is a place where we have a lot of communions.
We have some old dears
who make a point of going to mass
more often than our Lord himself.
I really do celebrate too often,
and yet I find each celebration
never fails to nourish me,
to make God close as touch.

You don't go very far as a minister
before you encounter deep sorrow and tragedy
amongst those for whom you have a responsibility.
Unbearable sorrow and tragedy.
I wouldn't have survived the first minute of my jocund day
without being able to bring that tragedy
to the eucharistic table
and let it be informed
by the tragedy re-enacted there.
And in a strange sense
the Passion re-enacted there
is itself informed
by the tragedies I almost daily encounter.
The Calvary of 2000 years ago
is not something buried in history
but is alive in the calvaries we are enmeshed in now
and makes the intolerable tolerable, well, almost.

More than that,
celebrating the Eucharist
day after day,
week after week,
year after year
eventually enables the penny to drop.
That just as God was impaled on the cross
he is impaled on the tragedies before our eyes
breathing nothing less than his triumph
into the wounds.

'Wherever love is outraged,
wherever hope is killed,
where man still wrongs his brother man,
thy Passion is fulfilled.
We see thy tortured body,
we see the wounds that bleed,
where brotherhood hangs crucified,
nailed to the cross of greed.' (*Timothy Rees*)

My greatest aid to prayer is my bicycle.
Cycling down some of the 1:3 slopes
really does drive you to prayer!
Actually the sheer thrill drives you to prayer.
But when I get on my bike,
then nothing else but God can get to me.
I can't type,
I can't read,
I can't answer the phone,
I can't reorder the church,
I can only pray.
I came to cycling late in life,
as a curate not in Goole but in Middlesbrough,
wobbling along the footpaths,

landing head first in parishioners' gardens.
I learnt to cycle late in life,
and it surprised me with prayer.

That's the funny thing about prayer.
I wonder sometimes whether its something we do,
'Oh dearie me, I haven't done enough prayer,'
or whether prayer actually finds us, seeks us out.
Seeks us out in the people we meet,
the situations we encounter,
the places we visit.
We dread prayer as a duty,
we're surprised by it discovering us as a joy.
Prayer, not a duty, but a joy, finding us.

'They tell me, Lord, that when I seem
To be in speech with you,
Since but one voice is heard, it's all a dream,
One talker aping two.

Sometimes it is, yet not as they
Conceive it. Rather, I
Seek in myself the things I hoped to say,
But lo, my wells are dry.

Then seeing me empty, you forsake
The listener's role and through
My dumb lips breathe and into utterance wake
The thoughts I never knew.

And thus you neither need reply,
Nor can; thus, while we seem
Two talkers, thou art One forever, and I
no dreamer, but thy dream.'

A poem by C S Lewis
from his Letters to Malcolm, chiefly on prayer,
taking its cue from Romans 8:
'We do not know what we ought to pray,
but the Spirit himself intercedes for us
with groans that words cannot express.'

Found by prayer, not a duty but a joy.
I'm not sure whether prayer can be forced.
As I said, I found it an unforgettable comfort
when I went to Cambridge,
and it has been a comfort at other times of crisis.
But not all of them.
In some crises I have prayed
and actually felt more addled rather than less addled,
as if prayer wasn't a relief from
a distraction from trouble,
but was actually drawing
you more into the centre of the storm.
I often think about Jesus' prayer from the cross,
'My God, my God why have you forsaken me?'
and whether that was that sort of prayer,
God wasn't out there riding to the rescue,
but actually was impaled on the storm of terror
with his son.
Perhaps I shy away from prayer
because such prayer frightens me,
I fear prayer could land me in a lot more trouble.

St Luke's Gospel
features a story which Jesus invented
to encourage his disciples to stick at prayer.
Even the unjust judge gave in to the woman

whose constant pleading was wearing him out.
Stick at prayer.
However much a failure I feel, I have stuck at it
for twenty five years ministry,
and I know that sticking at it will never leave me.
I want to encourage you to stick at it too,
because at the end of the day,
the end of our day, prayer is all that matters.

But one postscript, provided by Rabbi Lionel Blue:
at the end of the day it is quite healthy
to laugh at our shortcomings, to smile at the pathetic faith,
even amongst his ordained ministers,
the Son of Man will find on our earth when he comes.

New neighbours moved in next door to the Browns.
Very holy neighbours, orthodox Jews,
who came with all the Jewish trimmings,
including a box on their door-post.
'Is it for letters?' the Browns asked.
'Oh no,' Mr Cohen explained.
'That box is a Mezuzah,
which has accompanied our every move of house,
contains our most holy texts,
every time we enter and leave our house,
we open the box and read and pray them.'
'Can I have a look in?' Mr Brown asks.
'Well, yes,' Mr Cohen agrees, hesitatingly.
Mr Brown opens the box
and unwraps a tiny screwed up paper and reads it out,
'Help, I'm a prisoner in a Mezuzah factory.'

Lord, forgive all the prayers I have never said,
and all the prayers that I have pretended to say,

and all the prayers that have passed me by,
and fill me with prayer
for what remains of my day.

Talk Two

Will you be diligent in reading the Holy Scriptures?

'Nice sermon, Vicar,'
people often say as they shake hands
after the service.
John Austin Baker,
former Bishop of Salisbury,
tells of a slight variation
as an American effusively shook his hand
following a service in London.
'Great sermon, Vicar.
Gee, when you were preaching there,
I had this strangest sensation
that you were trying to tell me something.'

It's not just preachers.
Authors also try to tell their readers something.
I have to admit I'm a bit lazy
often when I read a book.
I'd like it just to be a story.
He did that,
she did this,
they went there.
I like it just to wash over me,
without having to think too much
about what the plot means.
Sometimes, however,
the plot is so improbable
that either you have to conclude
the author is a very bad writer
or he is communicating a deeper meaning
by his story's twists and turns.

For instance,
I recently read a piece
on Agatha Christie's
Murder on the Orient Express
where a very nasty American
snowed in on the eponymous train
is murdered by twelve other passengers.
On the face of it just another easy-read detective story
set in the 1930's.
But apparently the story was an allegory.
The 12 passengers of sundry continental nationalities,
represented the pre-1914 European nations.
The murdered American represented Woodrow Wilson,
the American president
who had imposed the Treaty of Versailles
to end the war of all wars,
thereby wrecking Europe and
sowing the seeds for another world war.
The Orient Express,
snowed in in the Balkans
was revisiting the place
where the Great War began.
Christie's novel championed cross Europe
getting its own back on an imperious America.

It all sounds a bit of an implausible allegory,
but there again,
Agatha Christie's stories have an oddness about them
which makes you wonder if there was anything else going on.

Apparently the poet
Philip Larkin,
near the end of his life,
bought a lectern sized Bible

and read it each morning while shaving.
When he eventually finished, he said,
'It's absolutely bloody amazing
to think that anyone ever believed any of that.'

True enough
the Bible has a lot of odd stories in it,
very odd stories,
'They're incredible,' the lazy reader might cry out.
'Things just don't happen like that.'
Well, no, they don't.
But maybe,
just maybe
through these incredible events,
God is trying to tell us something.
And as the authors of the Bible's books
set things down,
maybe,
just maybe,
by the way they amplify
what has happened before their eyes,
they are trying to tell us something too.

It is amazing
that anybody ever believed that
so much water could be turned into so much wine,
absolutely gallons of the stuff.
Absolutely amazing.
Almost as amazing
as believing that the man
who pulled the trick off
rose from the dead,
turning the tables on a particularly cruel
and final death.

Absolutely more amazing still,
is that that one who turned water in wine
and rose from the dead,
has been turning wine into his blood
for 2000 years,
millions and millions of gallons of the stuff.
Gallons whose consecration
priests and people have a hand in
at every Sunday Eucharist.
It's 25 years since my priesting.
On average I will have consecrated
a pint of communion wine a week,
amounting to 162.5 gallons across my quarter of a century.
As every Tony Hancock fan knows,
a human body contains about one gallon of blood.
So in my modest ministry
I have unleashed 162.5 Christs upon the world.
Just think what one Christ achieved!
162.5 is absolutely amazing.
Through all these amazing events
I get the teeniest impression
that God is trying to tell us something.
Certainly the sheer quantity said something
to Thomas Hardy
when he penned his poem,
Christmas 1924:

'Peace Upon Earth!' was said. We sing it,
And pay a million priests to bring it.
After two thousand years of mass
We've got as far as poison gas.

Interestingly the poison gas to which he refers
was the aerial gas attacks authorised by Winston Churchill

on Iraqi civilians in 1922

But back to the miracle of water into wine
at the beginning of John's Gospel,
just what's going on there?
Even after the most cursory flick through the Gospels
you realise John's Gospel has a very different feel
from the other three Gospels
in that nearly all of John's material is original,
whereas the other three
tend to share and rework
similar stories and plots.
Because of that,
the claim of popular scholarship is
that Matthew, Mark and Luke
are more reliable as historical documents
because they corroborate each other,
and that John's Gospel
is more of an interpretation of Jesus' life
through the medium of inventing new stories.

I do have my doubts
about that view of things.
The more I immerse myself in New Testament scholarship,
the more troubled I am by which Gospel
has claim to priority, historicity, hermeneutic.
Their structure and relationship with each other
strike me as so complex
as to brook no simplistic solution.
My problem is that the authors of the Gospels
didn't have different coloured pens.
It would have been so convenient
if they'd used one colour
when they were setting down

objective historical fact,
and another colour
when they were giving their interpretation
through expanding the story.
But they only used one colour,
so as to which story is history
and which story is interpretation
is really anybody's guess.
And I guess all the stories in the Gospels
are a bit of both,
history and interpretation
interwoven.

And as to which Gospel came first,
which is more historically reliable,
well I wouldn't put my money on any single one.
I believe there is history in them all.

When I was a boy,
I was particularly struck by a tune I heard
on a TV commercial,
by far the most inspiring music I'd ever come across.
My parents weren't particularly into the classics,
so it took me ages to find its source,
really ages.
It was the choral piece from
Beethoven's 9th Symphony,
Ode to Joy
which goes something like this.
I was so smitten by the thing
that I learnt it off by heart.
Our German teacher had told us
how he got Grade 1 in his French O Level
by learning the list of ingredients

on the French side of the HP sauce label.
A question had come up about a meal and off he ran,
molasses, brown sugar, vinegar etc.
I tried to pull off the same trick
learning Beethoven
and hoping against hope that Freude, Joy would come up.
It didn't.
It was Das Ruhrgebiet,
the distinctly joyless industrial region.
Years later,
I came across another Beethoven piece,
his Choral Fantasia,
which goes something like this.

Now Musicologists tell us
that the Fantasia came first,
and then over the years
Beethoven developed that
to form his Choral Symphony.
Despite my boyhood crush on the Choral Symphony,
I now actually prefer the Fantasia, and wonder
never mind what the diary dates say about the two pieces,
and wonder
what was going on in Beethoven's head.
Did the Choral Fantasia spring to his mind first
and then the Choral Symphony,
or was the Choral Symphony in his head all along
and the Choral Fantasia
was just an offshoot a refinement of it?
I have a similar approach to John's Gospel.
Was his Gospel a refinement of the others,
or were they a refinement of his,
or were they both different expressions
of one marvellous tune,

marvellous because it was God's tune?

One trait of John's Gospel
is that he describes an event
which often in the other Gospels
is cast as a story.
The Good Samaritan woman at the well in John's Gospel
tends the thirsty Jew, Jesus,
by drawing him a drink.
Event is cast as story in Luke
where the Good Samaritan tends the beaten up Jew
by the Jerusalem Jericho roadside.

Again in John's Gospel
we have an event,
a wedding at Cana
a well-attended wedding
with not only Jesus' family
but also his motley selection of disciples,
fishermen, quislings, zealots and presumably Judas
all on the guest list.
The host was clearly very generous indeed
as to whom he included.
Maybe because of that generosity
a disaster threatens
in that the wine,
that staple ingredient of Holy land celebrations,
the wine is about it give out.
Disaster however is averted
by one of the guests' mothers
twisting her son's arm
to perform a miracle
whose sheer generosity matches that of the host.
That's the event John describes.

Matthew and Luke
in their wedding slot, as it were,
tell a parable
about a great man
who desires the wedding of all weddings for his son.
But when the feast is ready,
infuriatingly those invited
one and all tend their apologies.
So in order to fill his banqueting hall,
the great man
has to drag in the riff-raff.
In Matthew's Gospel the great man
is a king
and very cross
and in a fit of pique
kills those who so ungraciously send their apologies.
He also gets cross with one of the aforementioned riff-raff
for not wearing the correct wedding gear,
in my view a eminently forgivable omission,
since by definition riff-raff
tend not to have in their possession
a wardrobe of dinner suites and black ties.

But bouncing John's wedding
against Luke and Matthew's wedding
is rather interesting.
John's wedding focuses on the wine,
and the sense of joyous celebration,
of a lost situation being marvellously rescued.
Luke and Matthew's wedding
almost miss the joy totally,
obsessed as they are
with bolstering the guest list.
Instead of joy

we have recrimination and even murder.
John's wedding from heaven
in Luke and Matthew is a wedding from hell.
That's precisely where Matthew's wedding ends up:
Where there will be a wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Which one do you go for?
What for instance are Luke and Matthew
trying to say to us?
That the Jews were the intended guests
for God's ultimate wedding feast,
but shunned the invitation
so God just had to have us foreigners in,
the world's riff-raff in Jewish eyes,
as a last resort?
But woe betide any foreigner
who doesn't play by God's rules,
who doesn't make a declaration of citizenship and loyalty
down to his very code of dress.

And what is John saying to us?
Well, he too has the riff-raff,
Jesus' disciples would be the riff-raff.
But rather than getting into a lather about the guests,
John concentrates on the menu,
chiefly the wine,
the finest wine in the history of the world.
Water from the Jewish purification rites
is turned into wine for everyone,
which mirrors
the salvation for the whole world
theme
of Luke and Matthew,
but in a joyous rather than judgmental way.

Which version do you prefer?
In some ways I suppose
it's whether you're prepared to be nice or nasty.
If you want people getting their just deserts
and law and order and discipline,
then go for Matthew and Luke.
If you want joy,
generous, gracious, overflowing joy,
then go for John.
What is going to be the hallmark of your ministry?

Which version surprises us?
Matthew and Luke tell an unusual story,
but not that surprising.
The king's crossness,
the cycle of recrimination,
in a sense it's the same old story,
humanity on its downward spiral
of resentment and revenge.
John's story breaks the impasse,
and takes our dead, tasteless, flat water
and surprises us with
the most gorgeous and ever-flowing wine.
Which story we opt for
as we diligently read the Scriptures
is whether we decide to choose death
safe, predictable, but still death
or life,
haphazard, risky but life in all its fullness.

'Night's candles are burnt out
and jocund day stands tiptoe on misty mountain top.
I must be gone and live,' Romeo declares
'Or stay and die.'

Gee,
I've just got this strangest feeling
that John and Shakespeare are trying to tell us something.

Talk Three

Will you endeavour to fashion your own life and that of your household...

Apparently
Islamic suicide bombers are taught
that if they are successful in their kamikaze mission,
then they will immediately enter paradise,
and have their every whim catered to
by seventy two lush virgins for the rest of eternity.

If the after-life has any logic about it at all,
I would have thought they would have
had to spend eternity
trying to placate the dozen or so very very cross Jews
or thousands of very cross 9/11 Americans
who had been prematurely dispatched
along with their crazed killer.

Don't get me wrong.

I'm not just knocking the excesses and extremes of Islam,
because every faith has its unpalatable tenets.

God ordering Abraham to sacrifice
his beloved only son Isaac
is pretty hard to take.

'If God told me to do that to my child,
I'd tell him to get lost,'
a gruff Teessider once exclaimed to me.

OK

you can see the incident as a turning point
in the history of religion,
with Abraham moving on
from a pagan primitive bloodlust faith

in a deity who delights in child-sacrifice
to a faith in a loving Yahweh,
the God who cradles the world in his tender embrace.
But even then,
the episode still leaves a nasty taste in my mouth.
There's a dark side to the story
which belies my liberal interpretation.
At Sinai only one Biblical book later
God thunders
thou shalt not murder.
Yet here we have him inciting Abraham to murder
to test his loyalty.
I'm sorry, but this incident doesn't paint God
in a very moral light,
and I want to proclaim,
God is actually more moral than this,
and so is mankind,
a mankind
who I hope is not so easily duped to commit infanticide.

And then there's all that stuff in 1 Samuel
where poor old King Saul
just can't get it right.
Ordered by God to kill every Amalakite
man, woman, child and beast,
he spares some of them,
and is punished by having the kingship
ultimately taken away from him.
Had Saul done what God ordered him to do,
we'd have indicted him for war crimes.
Because he proved too merciful, God shunned him.

OK, it's a complicated story,
and Saul might have had some murky ulterior motives,

sparing the best beasts and best humans to take as booty,
maybe even to sacrifice to his God
made in Samuel's tetchy image.

But even so,

God doesn't come across in this incident in a good light,
and I would want to say
the God I know is much more merciful
and life-affirming than this.

Some wag once claimed that
one sure thing as you turned the pages of the OT,
God mellows with age.

Or maybe it's mankind who mellows,
as they better reflect God's likeness
a calling and recalling manifold.

Whatever, by the time you reach the NT,
you expect God to behave himself.

And yet we have Jesus surprising us in Luke's Gospel.

Luke's Gospel has been described as
the Gospel of the Anawim,
the Gospel of the humble ones,
the Gospel of the forgotten-corner ones,
to coin a bishop!

Little people loom large with Luke.

Luke has a cast list of little people
longer than that of Lord of the Rings.

Barren Elizabeth and Zechariah,
a virgin called Mary,

shepherds who were beyond the religious pale,
watching their flocks by day and by night,
failing to observe the Sabbath,
getting themselves unclean
by wandering into Gentile territory to

rescue their lost sheep.

Simeon and Anna,

old and dotty and ignored,

Women of the streets,

prodigal sons,

detested Samaritans,

terrorists who were getting their just deserts,

gasping with their last breath,

The Taize chant

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

A whole family of little people,

forgotten ones,

who are not forgotten by Christ.

A famous commentator on Luke Gospel

describes it as

the Gospel of pardons,

the big tent Gospel

which even includes enemies

in Jesus family,

his enemies

as he declares from the cross,

'Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.'

In this gentlest of gentle Gospels

we are brought up short by the following words:

'Whoever comes to me

and does not hate father and mother,

wife and children,

brothers and sisters,

yes even life itself,

cannot be my disciple.'

Oh dear,

what on earth do you do with that text?

Jesus doesn't say
'Unless you neglect father and mother,
unless you keep in perspective wife and children,
unless you limit your loyalty to brothers and sisters
unless you are realistic about your life/work balance...'
He says hate,
with all the vehemence connected with the word.
He pulls no punches whatsoever.

First I have to be honest and say,
'I can't go with you, there, Lord,
we have to part company at this point.
No doubt you had your reasons,
but I can't go along with you.'
I sense it is better I am honest rather than
taking the words to mean the opposite
from what they actually mean.
You know the sort of thing.
'When Jesus said that it was easier for a camel
to go through the eye of a needle
than for a rich man to inherit the kingdom of heaven,
he didn't really mean the actual eye of a needle.
He meant that low archway into Jerusalem
called the eye of a needle.
So narrow, so low,
that a camel had to be relieved of some of its load
before it could get through.
Jesus wasn't condemning riches per se,
just saying you can't take it all with you.'
It's a very seductive argument
that tones down the harshness
of Jesus' bald saying.
With one tiny flaw.
In the history of Jerusalem

there has never been an archway
called the eye of a needle.

I also believe it is better to be honest
than to pretend, to bluff.
Peter proclaimed,
'Lord, even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you.'
But he couldn't deliver that promise.
He went back on his brave words and did deny him.
I feel that it is better to be honest to God
be realistic
and know our limitations
rather than lie.
Ultimate vocation
God's call for us all
is only discovered when we stop playing games,
when we stop pretending
and are honest with ourselves
and so with God.

Secondly, odd though Jesus' words are,
I can imagine a scenario where they cropped up.
Everybody proffering their excuses,
'Well, I'd like to go along with you Jesus,
but I'm too busy,
I've got friends coming round to dinner,
I've got to pick up the children from school,
It's our anniversary,
I need to clean out my parents' home.'
And faced with 1001 domestic excuses,
and seeing the dawning kingdom slip away from him
because of his followers' apathy,
I can imagine him snapping,
'Look here, unless you hate...'

When people say to me,
'I can't come to church on Sunday,
I've got to cook the dinner for our guests.'
I have to say I'm sorely tempted to speak as Jesus spoke:
'Unless you hate your guests...'

Thirdly,
if we're honest,
we have to admit that our loyalties
even within the family
have to be divided.
The decisions we face
are never quite as extreme
as in the film Sophie's choice,
where the cruel Gestapo
force the Jewess Sophie
to decide which of her two children
are to be condemned to the gas chamber.
She has to let one child go,
so that she and her remaining child can live.
She effectively trades one child for life.

That's an extreme example,
but families do trade.
'Shall we look after grandad at home
or admit him to a nursing home?'
There's no easy solution to that one.
Whichever way you jump involves someone's sacrificed.
My family moved in the middle of my A-levels,
my dad wanted a parish where he was in sole charge.
I sympathised with his desire,
but I found it a very tough transition
from one sixth form to another.
What I'm saying is that however well motivated we may feel,

sometimes our family and friends get hurt
because of our pursuit of the greater good.
We never set out to hate them,
but sometimes the situation can make people
feel as if they were hated.
'Nobody wants me, nobody loves me,'
cries grandad in his old people's home.

Finally,
I would have the audacity to come back at Jesus.
'I can understand, Lord,
how you feel your kingdom is losing out
because of all our domestic ties.
But rather than being a distraction
from your kingdom of love,
I see my family as an outpost of that kingdom,
schooling me in its qualities.
Loving rather than hating
mother, father,
wife, children,
brothers and sisters and even myself
makes me blossom as your child.'
Only by loving do we enter into true humanity,
and only by entering true humanity
can we share Christ's divinity.

As an immature 26 year old
I asked Rachel to marry me,
Rachel whom I'd met at a Lent Course,
so there is a point to Lent Courses.
But one of the reasons why I asked her to marry me
was that I felt very very strongly
that marriage and the family that went with it
would give me the best shot

I would ever have in this life
of receiving and giving the love
championed by St Paul in I Corinthians 13,
a love which is patient, kind, not self-seeking,
which keeps no score of wrongs,
but delights in the truth.

Folk get cross when
people misquote St Augustine,
'Love and do what you will.'
It should be 'Love God and do what you will,'
they complain,
as if they went to college with Augustine.
But if you love with the sort of love
that I Corinthians 13 champions,
then the word God
is really superfluous.
because that sort of love is already divine.

In my book,
the kingdom of God won't dawn despite family and friends,
but because of them
and through them
as fellow citizens of God's country.

In a play about the life
of a 17th century Welsh mystic
Morgan Lloyd,
the playwright charts his hero's progress
through the religious controversies of that age.
Not surprisingly,
by the end of the play
Lloyd has reached
a state of total disillusionment and despair.

He pours out his agony in a desperate plea to God,
'O God, come, come, bring your holy death to kiss me
to your own clear, shining light.'
There is complete silence,
and then Lloyd's little son comes on to the stage.
He calls to his father quietly and affectionately
and Lloyd looks at him,
as though hearing a voice for the first time.
He stretches out his hand to the boy, who takes it.
Then his small daughter
comes in a calls to him,
and he offers her his other hand.
Morgan's wife then joins them, carrying their baby.
She gives the child to her husband,
and cradling the little one in his arms,
he begins to sing her a nursery rhyme.
The others join in.
The playwright,
John Gwilym Jones,
tells us that the play should end on
'a note of quiet, affectionate joy.'
The playwright's message
is that God will not be found
in abstruse and bitter theological and political wrangling.
He may, however,
be found in the loving-kindness
that is present in close human relationships at their best.
When his son calls him,
Lloyd recognises the voice of love
which is the voice of God.
He sees that the things which had thought significant,
the agonising soul-searching
and the anguished spiritual quest
with all its complex doctrinal confrontations,

were really irrelevant.
God was not present in them,
but was present in the little family
whom Lloyd had neglected and ignored for so long.

One undoubted cheer for the C of E
is that for five centuries
it has sanctioned clergy-in-relationship,
good adverts for God-in-relationship.
To decree now that because of their sexual orientation
some clergy cannot be in relationship
actually undermines our very strength.

'Unless you hate father and mother
wife and children
brothers and sisters you cannot be my disciple.'

As Jesus howls those understandable words,
it is other howls that I hear and am moved by.
The howls of a new born baby
in a peasants' stable in Bethlehem,
the howls of a man being cruelly crucified at Calvary
as his dear mother looks on.
Those howls at both ends of life's spectrum
break my heart and move me to be tender
to the Christ who dwells in all God's children
and through whom his kingdom will one day dawn.
At their ordination,
priests and deacons
as representatives of the whole people of God
are asked,
Will you strive to fashion your own life
and that of your household
according to the way of Christ?

I've never gone for that question in a big way,
since I think vicarage families
have enough to put up with
without Rev'd Dad or Rev'd Mum
fashioning them.
Unless you've been a vicarage kid
you haven't a clue
about the abuse they take at school,
the abuse they take from the congregation
who expect them to be holier than them.
When my father was first ordained,
he served in East Hull.
I was six.
On my first day at my new school by the East Hull Drain
the children all ganged up around me,
'Na, na, na, na, na,
your dad's a vicar.'
'He isn't a vicar,'
I replied in all seriousness,
'He's just been ordained a deacon
and is the assistant curate of Marfleet.'
The earnestness of my reply
and the complexities of Anglican ecclesiology
flawed them.
They went away,
the oldest first,
and I never had any trouble with them after that.

But don't tell me about clergy fashioning their families.
That road is scattered with too many victims.
If I was allowed to rewrite the ordinal
I would instead ask
Will you allow Christ to fashion you
through those around you?

Will you be as Christ to those you love,
and see none other than Christ
in those who love you?
Such a vow is far far bigger than ordination,
and should challenge us all
as we strive to be fashioned by family.
If God is incarnate,
then that's where we're most likely to meet him,
in those around us!
Or to put it another way,
When Jesus told us to love our enemies,
he was good enough to give us relatives to practice on!

And just in case you can't get those
seventy two lush virgins
out of your mind,
the precise translation
of the ancient arabic is a bit tricky.
The word translated as virgins
could just as well be read
as sultanas.
An eternity with seventy two lush sultanas
for blowing apart those around you.
Mm.
Whilst the deal
sounds just like the sort of thing
brokered by Abraham and Saul's
tetchy God,
I think after due consideration
I'll shun the sultanas
and stick with those around me
and pray that they will stick with me.

Talk Four

Do you believe that God has called you?

My friend, Stephen,
who is a vicar in the Lake District
is somewhat accident-prone
to say the least.
In his first week as a clergyman
he visited a parishioner in hospital
and sat on the bedside chatting.
To start with the patient was a very good colour,
but as the visit progressed
his colour drained,
then he became pale,
then turned grey and started gasping for breath.
To his credit Stephen pressed the alarm button.
A nurse shot in,
pushed Stephen away,
pulled away the blanket
to reveal the squashed intravenous tubes,
the patient's lifeline,
on which Stephen had been sitting.

Since then he hasn't got any better.
A few weeks ago he revealed
he was organising an animal service
in church for people's pets.
It wasn't his idea,
but the brain child of the lady of the manor.
Unfortunately as Stephen drove up her drive
to discuss the service
he ran over and killed her prize pet cat.
Not surprisingly the service never saw the light of day.

At college we practised a baptism.
Stephen tripped up the font steps
and threw the baby into
the somewhat startled audience,
like a bride throwing her bouquet into the crowd.
Fortunately for Stephen
and even more fortunately for the child being baptised,
the baby was actually a doll.

Sometimes his message is heard clumsily.
Recently he led a Primary School Assembly
on how he had decided to become a vegan for Lent,
explaining that his wife had been a vegan for a long time.
Later that evening a little girl told her startled mother,
'The Vicar's become a virgin for Lent.
His wife's been one for a long time!'

I could go on with more and more examples.
But the funny thing is,
despite his obvious clumsiness,
Stephen is a marvellous priest,
much loved by his parishioners.
It all goes to show
that God calls some odd people,
present company unexcepted.

I've witnessed my fair share of clumsiness.
On placement in Seacroft,
the roughest part of Leeds in 1980,
I unwisely encouraged the Sunday School
to act out the story of the Good Samaritan.
The robbers,
who were supposed to have a minor part,
instead stole the show

and beat up
not only the itinerant Jew,
but also the priest, the Levite and
the eponymous Samaritan
as a mass of flailing arms and legs
tumbled down the aisle.

The Vicar of Seacroft also had his problems.
He entertained the toddlers at a Pram service
by acting out the parable
of the house built on sand
and the house built on rock.

When Jesus first told the story
he did not have the advantage that vicar had,
of having to hand
a tray of sand,
a tray of rocks,
a pack of cards and a jug of water.
Which is just as well,
because if he had had,
I doubt we would ever
have heard of the parable again.

On the tray of sand
The vicar duly built a house of cards,
and then poured water over the construction
to show how flimsy it all was.
To his obvious annoyance,
not a single card shifted
until the hand of the Vicar,
if not the hand of God,
assisted the demolition.

The jug of water had more luck
with the house of cards built on the rocks,
in that the first drop
brought the whole lot crashing down.

The children thoroughly enjoyed the show,
although I shudder to think
what moral they took away with them.
Thank God
they didn't become Barrett House builders.
Or perhaps they did.

What **I** took away
was a picture of a house built on sand
which surprisingly,
infuriatingly,
wonderfully survives.

A house built on sand:
the essence of ministry,
which itself is a sign of the Christian discipleship
to which we all are called,
lay and ordained.

Because unlike any other profession
or vocation,
there are no certainties.
Doctors have their stethoscopes,
teachers their blackboard,
soccer players their football,
Christians only have God.

You can't pin God down,
you can't haul him out

of a filing cabinet and say,
this is our product, buy now.
When you think
you've got God sewn up,
walled up in a tomb
or in a church,
you actually miss Him by a mile.
He is such a fast God,
always before us
and leaving as we arrive.

As a minister
you build your belief,
your career,
your family's security
on the shifting sands of faith,
where any guarantee
would be a contradiction in terms.
Faith which is provable,
which has concrete definition
with reams and reams of smallprint
ain't faith.

In my book,
any deacon worth his salt
worth his sand,
any Christian worth his salt,
worth his sand,
must daily lose his nerve
and balk in horror,
"What if all this were untrue,
a sham,
what if my whole life's point
was bogus to the core?"

Those who happily follow
in the steps of our Lord
also share his agony
that the whole show
might be pathetically pointless,
and with him cry
in **their** Garden of Gethsemane,
"Take this cup away from me!"
with him cry at **their** Calvary,
"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me!"

When I was Archbishop's chaplain,
one frosty December night
the strange thought came to me
that that day was John Habgood's
40th anniversary of his ordination.
Something he'd said years back
suddenly clicked in my mind.
Today was the day,
and I'd missed it.
No card, no present, no congratulations.
I rushed up to the dark palace
to make amends.
On the frosty terrace
by the lapping waters of the freezing Ouse
to my horror
I found the suited Archbishop
lying flat out on the paving stones,
some thirty feet below his study window.
"My God," I thought, "He's thrown himself down."

"Are you all right, Archbishop," I stupidly asked.

"Of course I'm all right,"

what seconds before I thought
had been a corpse
now was definitely resurrected and answered testily.
“We’ve got a leak in the house
and I’m trying to turn the water off.
The stopcock’s down this hole.”

“Fine,” I replied,
continuing idiotically,
“By the way,
it’s not the anniversary
of your ordination today, is it?”
“Course it isn’t,” he replied,
giving me the look
that Mainwaring reserved for Pike,
“I was ordained in the summer.”
I was grateful he didn’t add,
“You stupid boy!”

Even so,
I could see how
behind all the jollity of forty years’ ministry,
the countless Christenings,
the myriads of weddings,
the bunfights,
the parties,
the joyous Eucharists,
the ordinations,
I could see how
behind all these,
the tragedies encountered,
the darkness and doubts within and without,
the idiotic, pastorally inept folk who try to wreck the show,
all that could have caused a giant

like John Habgood
to end it all.

Immediately after your ordination,
the prayer runs,
Almighty God,
give your servants grace.
Grace is a funny nebulous word
but at the same time
the key word of faith,
sheer, undeserved gift,
that surprising power
of the so elusive God
which can make barren women keep house
and fire a lifetime’s ministry and discipleship,
rejoicing with those who rejoice
weeping with those who weep.
When it comes **to**
that grace,
so intangible,
so difficult to measure,
is all we need,
is all we,
despite our many soaring achievements,
is all we actually have.

All ordinations now usually take place
at Petertide,
with Peter an example
for us all to follow.
What was it about him
that made Jesus call him a rock?

I think Jesus was being ironic.

After all,
irony is one of the few weapons left.
1. The Americans don't understand it.
2. They can't touch you for in these politically correct times.
Jesus had his eye on things which would abide for ever.

There was a certain irony in calling Peter a rock
when he was so unrocklike
so unstable.
Just flip through his CV.
Switched from a promising career
as a fisherman
to being a shepherd,
a job he knew next to nothing about.
Promised to stick by his boss to the hilt
and then,
when it came to the crunch
ran off,
kept his distance,
denying ever
even having anything to do with the firm.

A funny sort of rock.
Shifting sand
would have been a better name.
But then you'd have lost the irony.

Peter wasn't the rock.
God was.
The God who came to him
when he was down
when all his dreams were dashed,
when he realised how utterly useless he was,
as he wept

bitterly as he betrayed his Lord.
At that moment
God came to him
and raised him up
as he raised his dead Son
from the stone cold tomb.
When the foundations of his life were shaking
it was God, gracious God
who provided Peter with his stability.

When our foundations shake
God can do the same with us.
We may call to him as a last resort,
"God help me!"

He will.
He won't take offence
at being the last one to be picked for your team.
Even though you've sent him home,
God is not too proud to be recalled.
He, whose very name is love,
is not quick to take offence,
keeps no score of wrongs.
And the gracious God
will not just come to you,
but power you in all your clumsiness
to make his parables work out in the end.

Peter, God's rock
was at heart a fisherman.
If you think about it,
those clumsy fishermen by Lake Galilee
were odd people for Jesus to call.
I often stand at Cobble Landing

in Filey Bay and look at the rough fisherman
busy landing their catch,
swearing away,
and wonder what their response would be
if I said to them, 'Follow me.'
If Ladbrokes had been running a
on who was going to be in Jesus' team,
their 2:1 odds would have been
on the Pharisees,
the Saducees,
the High Priests,
the Rabbis,
all so well qualified on religious matters.
Whereas fishermen
I'd have given them about 50,000:1,

And yet they were a brilliant choice.
They caused the good news of Jesus
to be carried to the very ends of the earth.
And that means North Yorkshire and Manchester
Without the witness and dedication of those fisherman,
we would never have heard Jesus' story,
let alone have our very selves shaped by it.

What made him do it?
What made him choose such unlikely candidates?
First,
fishermen have to spend a lot of time watching,
toiling all night and catching nothing,
but keeping at it,
staying faithful to their trade.
Good qualities for fish watchers
and for God watchers.
R S Thomas used to spend much of his time

lurking at the end of the Llynn peninsular,
looking for migrating birds returning,
a watching ministry.
Orthodox Jews set a man at the door of the synagogue
at every Sabbath service
to watch for the Messiah;
what a lovely role for a churchwarden,
a watchman,
a watchwoman.

Secondly,
as Psalm 108 goes,
'They that go down to the sea in ships
and occupy their business in great waters,
these men see the works of the Lord
and his wonders in the deep,
For at his word the stormy wind ariseth,
which lifteth up the waves thereof.
They reel to and fro
and stagger like a drunken man,
so that when they cry unto the Lord in their trouble,
he delivereth them out of their distress.'
We comfortable landlubbers for the most part
skim along the surface of life,
choosing to dip our toe into the waters of faith,
a bit of religion,
the icing on the cake.
Fishermen
caught in a storm at sea
facing death each and every moment,
are forced to cry out,
to depend on God.

And when the storm comes,

fishermen really have to play as team members,
rowing together,
manning the pumps together,
furling the sails together.
The luxury of opting out,
of doing their own thing,
or of sulking and doing nothing
is not for them.

If it was,
then that would dictate certain disaster
for every member of the crew.

And fishermen work to feed the world.
It's as simple as that.
That's their job.
That's their role.

Patiently watching.
Absolutely depending on God.
Team players.
Feeding the world.
Crucial qualities for fishermen.
Crucial qualities for fishers of men.

Little wonder that fish became Jesus' trademark.
that a fish,
not a crucifix
was the Christians first emblem.
with ιχθυσ, the Greek word for fish
an acronym
with each letter spelling out the early Christian creed
Ιησους χριστος θεου υιος ζωτηρ,
Jesus Christ, God's son, Saviour.

We nearly always eat fish on a Friday.
I could say it's because we're pious,
abstain from meat
on the day our Lord,
the lamb of God was sacrificed.
But actually Friday is when the Fishman comes to Helmsley
and you don't want to let his product hang around too long.

Maybe though there are more positive connotations.
The fish we eat can also remind us of the fisherman
who caught the stuff,
remind us of those fisherman by Galilee's seashore,
those men to whom he came by the lakeside
and their surprising qualities of discipleship:
Watching,
Depending,
Team-playing,
Feeding.
Qualities which should be ours
as we,
like my friend Stephen,
surprise the God who surprises us
By calling us to his service.

Ordination sermon

Sunday 1 July 2007

Manchester Cathedral

Alex was a hyperactive six-year-old
who disrupted every single church service he attended.

One Sunday,
he was kneeling at the altar rail
or rather wriggling at the altar rail
waiting for a blessing.

He pointedly looked to his right and to his left
at the rather dubious characters who flanked him,
and blurted out,
'What are you lot doing here?!'

I'm ashamed to say
the same thought often occurs to me
as I administer communion to characters
who often make life rather difficult for me:
'What are you lot doing here?!'

In fact I thought something similar
25 years back
when I sat where our
deacons to be
are sitting today,
awaiting my own ordination.
'What am I doing here?'

The question cut two ways.
'What am **I** doing **here**?'
I felt so bogus,

so amazed to have got this far.
Surely the Selection Conference that recommended me,
the Theological College that trained me,
the Archbishop who was to ordain me,
all these experts
should have seen through me,
should have rejected me on so many counts:
My prayer so languid, my faith so dim,
a cynicism of a man twice my age.
All these fatal flaws,
not to mention
my extensive Roy Orbison record collection,
all these fatal flaws
should have disqualified me.
Yet much to my surprise,
much to my horror,
here I was.
I can only compare the experience
to the elderly peer
who had the ultimate nightmare
that he was making a speech
in the House of Lords,
and woke up to find that he was.
Much to my surprise,
much to my horror,
here I was.
Isaiah captured it perfectly.
Woe is me.
I am lost.
I am a man of unclean lips.
What am **I** doing **here**?

And the second sense?
What **am** I doing here?

What was I doing being ordained
in an age labelled post-Christian?
As society fragmented
and values were broken down,
with the Barbarians metaphorically
at the very gates,
surely I ought to be out there
DOING
something,
rather than fooling around in a dog collar.

Archbishop Stuart Blanch
used to tell the story of a frustrated vicar
who padlocked his church door on a Sunday morning
and wrote this notice on it:
'You lot have been coming here long enough,
now go out and do something!'

What was I doing
being ordained in a church
whose influence was declining?
What was I doing being ordained into a profession
parodied by the Media as silly and ineffectual:
'More tea, Vicar?'
What **am** I doing here?

Of course, an unstable society
is not a new phenomenon.
I'm sorry to say that, contra Larkin,
change, instability and sexual intercourse
did not begin in 1963.
28 centuries ago in the year King Uzziah died
Isaiah would have gone into the temple
with similar misgivings.

Like Elizabeth II,
Uzziah had had his golden jubilee,
No doubt complete with Sir Paul McCartney
trilling, 'All you need is Law.'
Uzziah had reigned for a comparatively stable
and prosperous 52 years.

In a very, very long, rather depressing
and mostly unpronounceable list,
Uzziah was one of the few kings
of Judah or Israel
'who did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.'
A rare
Sellars and Yeatman 1066-and-all-that type compliment
anachronistically found in the Book of Chronicles.

But now good king Uzziah was dead.
Society was breaking down,
the twelve tribes of Israel were at loggerheads yet again,
with the Barbarians at the very gates,
ready to gobble them up.
And so Isaiah enters the temple.
What **am** I doing here?
Why aren't I outside,
doing something,
seeking allies,
sharpening the spear,
tensing the bow?

Why am **I** here, when I am so unworthy?
Why **am** I here when all this is so irrelevant.
Two questions,
two very good questions
to throw at

so bewildered, so empty a stage
Yet onto that empty stage
walks God.

And then comes another stage,
again in Jerusalem,
but 800 years down the line.
Eleven timid and broken disciples
huddled together
behind locked doors
on the evening of the first day of the week.
I suppose they were the first ever Evensong congregation.
We invariably have eleven,
twelve when I make my dramatic entry.
They were locked in
for fear of the Jews.
A curious phrase peculiar to John's Gospel.
'What are we doing here
when the Jewish authorities are clearly taking action
against men such as us?
Oughtn't we to disperse,
to go underground,
otherwise they might do to us
the dreadful things they did to him.'

For fear of the Jews.
But of course, the disciples themselves were Jews,
they may have locked the doors,
but they couldn't lock out themselves,
their faithlessness,
their fickleness,
what David Lodge described
not so much as a stream of human consciousness
but as a sewer of human consciousness.

'What are we doing here,
what is the point of human existence
when despite our best efforts
it goes so wrong, so very wrong?'

For fear of the Jews.
Of course there was one Jew
they feared more than any other.
Him.
'What are we doing here
when we let him down so very badly,
so very finally?'
'I tell you I do not know the man of whom you speak,'
Peter had protested to the servant girl
in a sort of precursor for a Selection Conference interview,
as he warmed his hands by the fire
as his Lord shivered with fear.

'Boy, let's hope he doesn't
rise up
as he said he would,
because he'll give us such a mouthful.
"You dirty, double crossing rats!"'
We often fondly imagine the disciples
yearning for the Resurrection.
I guess they dreaded it, and the judgement it would bring.
'What are we doing here,
in the upper room,
that upper room pregnant with last supper memories.
Let's get out of here, banish his ghost.'
So much fear swirling around on that first day of the week.
Fear of the authorities,
fear of themselves,
fear of him.

Yet onto their fearful stage,
so empty of hope and promise,
walks God-in-Christ
and says 'Peace be with you.'

If we're honest
those fears and emotions of Isaiah
those fears and emotions of those disciples
are echoed by us all,
unworthiness,
pointlessness,
dread, utter emptiness.
Their antidote is found in our reading from Romans.
Lots of good,
tediously good advice
about never flagging in humility
in sacrifice
in love etc.
Guidelines for the professional conduct of the clergy.

But one almost throw-away phrase
leaps out of the page
and strikes me forcibly.
Paul prefaces his advice with the words,
'By the grace given to me.'

Grace is sheer undeserved gift.
And that sheer undeserved gift is God himself.

Our parish mission statement -
yes, I can be trendy too - is
'God's so priceless he comes free'
and we use it as a yardstick for every action.
God as sheer undeserved gift.

Onto our empty stage walks God.

That's what we're celebrating today.
We're not celebrating that these deacons-to-be
have done well at their studies,
although they have done well, marvellously well.
Nor are we celebrating that these deacons-to-be
are super-Christians,
although they are super Christians.
But rather we are celebrating
that they have tried to empty themselves
and will keep on trying to empty themselves
of all the clutter,
so that they can daily, hourly, minutely,
receive God
who comes to us all as sheer gift.

At times
they will undoubtedly feel immensely unworthy,
at times
they will undoubtedly feel so empty and forsaken,
at times
they will huddle together
or huddle alone, frightened
for fear of whoever.
At times.
But at those very times
the clutter will have been cleared
for God to be at his strongest.
'When I am weak, then I am strong,'
wrote St Paul.
Had he had more space,
and had he read Theology at Cambridge,
I'm sure he would have added,

'When I am weak, then God is strong.'
Archbishop Stuart Blanch
used to ask of candidates for ordination,
'What are his promising weaknesses?'
'When I am weak, then God is strong.'
Our new deacons-to-be
are a sign of that.
Even after their ordination
they will still be deacons to **be**
rather than to do,
a sign and channel of God's strength
which flows not so much through
the adrenaline buzz of activity,
but which rather flows through weakness
as it flowed at Calvary.

No doubt our new deacons
will tell their children and grandchildren,
In the year Tony Blair retired I saw the Lord.
That vision of God's strength
in the midst of our weakness,
that sheer gift,
that grace is sufficient for our new deacons and priests
and sufficient for us all.

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
fast bound in sin and nature's night.
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, my dungeon flamed with light.
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose,
went forth
and followed thee.'