

Sermon at the welcome for Ben Nicholson, ordained at Petertide 2008

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 occurred to me
as I administered communion to characters
who often made life rather difficult for me:
'What are you lot doing here?!'

In fact I thought something similar
27 years back when I sat where
Ben was sitting earlier 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.
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 –
but it's good to see the church packed tonight – keep it up!
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 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 Ben
has done well at his studies,
although he has done well, marvellously well,
juggling all that with work, family and leisure.
Nor are we celebrating that our new deacon is super-Christians,
although he is a super Christian!
But rather we are celebrating
that he has tried to empty himself
and will keep on trying to empty himself
of all the clutter,
so that he can daily, hourly, minutely,
receive God
who comes to us all as sheer gift.

At times
he will undoubtedly feel immensely unworthy,
at times
he will undoubtedly feel so empty and forsaken,
at times
he will huddle together with those he trained with
or huddle alone, frightened
for fear of whoever – I hope not his vicar!
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.'
Ben is no longer a deacon-to-be
but I hope he 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 deacon
will tell his children and grandchildren,
In the year, in the weekend David Tennant nearly died,
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.'