

**ORDINATION SERVICES AT ST EDMUNDSBURY CATHEDRAL
SATURDAY 30 JUNE 2018**

**SERMONS PREACHED BY
THE RT REVD DR MIKE HARRISON, BISHOP OF DUNWICH**

Priests sermon: “Do you not remember?”

They're a funny lot, clergy, aren't they? I mean not me and you obviously....but if you look at the history of clergy there are some bizarre exemplars – like Robert Stephen Hawker a vicar in Cornwall in the 1800s who swam out to a rock and sat on it wearing a wig of plaited seaweed and howling as he supposed a mermaid might; He also excommunicated his cat because he caught the animal mousing on a Sunday; then there was Rev. Ray Trudgian, a vicar in the east of England and a renowned poultry breeder. He sometimes gave his Sunday sermon from the pulpit accompanied by a chicken. (Any of you have chickens...hmm) And Canon Wilfred Pemberton in Derbyshire who had a novel way of making time for his housework. He would start his congregation off singing Psalm 119, all 176 verses of it. His presence not immediately needed in the church he would nip off to feed his chickens and do a bit of dusting in the rectory and return in time to conduct the next part of the service. Now I am sure you bear no resemblance to such individuals, but if clergy aren't merely there to provide the last bastions of English eccentricity then what are they for?

Or more to the point today, what are priests for? *Well, a number of things, Not least, to tell us what God thinks of us.* After all, we live in a world where we're often told, subtly and not so subtly, we don't measure up, we aren't adequate; there are pictures everywhere in our visual culture of beautiful people wearing beautiful things living beautiful lives and an implicit whisper underneath – that's not you....but it could be...and if only you buy this or that, get this or that, you will be saved from your pear shaped figure, pimply face or problem relationships. It's a scam, we know it's a scam, but if our self-understanding isn't rooted elsewhere we will be sold this story. How do we resist those whispers saying we're unworthy, not good enough, don't belong? Well baptism for one thing – where God shouts down the whispers saying “you are my beloved, do not question your worth, I am besotted with you and more than the best of parents, I desire you to be with me and for you to grow in me into your true joy”. So, nearly-priests, continue to pour water on God's children in baptism, splash them in the face and tell them God sees not what you have been or are, but what you will be in Him - bind them with the promises of God and remind them God adores their company, pear-shaped, pimply or whatever. Remind God's people of this as often as you can. Because we are a forgetful people.

What are priests for? Well they are to declare God's mercy and enable people to receive it - It's called God's forgiveness. Or in technical language confession and absolution. Sometimes we fail to explain this properly. It's not that if we say we're really, really sorry God will then begrudgingly change his dim view of us and forgive us. That's not it at all. God never changes his mind about us. He's in love with us. What He does in forgiveness again and again is change our mind about him...that's why we're sorry, that's what forgiveness is about – recognising with astonishment God's unwavering and eternal regard for us and allowing that infinite compassion to draw us out of the night of shame and regret into the bright dawn of a new day in his tender company. And as priests we teach and declare this because we are a forgetful people..

What are priests for? For rehearsing the story we are to live out of. We can only know who we are and what we are to do on the basis of knowing of what story we're a part. If we think we're in a war, we'll act accordingly. If we're think we've always been ignored, passed over and unjustly neglected, we'll act accordingly. If we think people are harsh and unendingly mean to us, we'll act accordingly. Priests rehearse a different story – that we are the recipients of God's generosity & gifting in so many ways and are to act accordingly. This reaches it's culminating point in the Eucharist – where the story of God's way with us historically is rehearsed. A priest was once asked "why do we receive communion so often?" and she replied "because by Monday we have forgotten who we are". Remind people of their story. Remind people, remind people of not only how Jesus died, but of how he lived, of how he lived, and lives. Because we are a forgetful people.

What are priests for? To bless people. Mark Russell, CEO of CA suggests one way of doing this is unexpected acts of kindness. So for example when he travels he regularly takes a river ferry – costs a £5 and he always pays for the car behind him too. It's an act of witness, more to the cashier than anyone else who asks "why are you doing this?" and he replies "because I'm a Christian". "Yes but why?" "Jesus loves the driver behind me and I'm just honouring that". Sometimes he'll find the car flashing lights and waving thanks. However a while back there was a lorry behind, that's £15. Ouch, Mark bit the bullet – only not so much as an acknowledgement, never mind a wave. Mark spent most of the rest of the day brooding on this until, in prayer he felt a voice saying "Mark, you're missing the point, bless people". Blessing with unexpected acts of kindness, good news. Now a MU at one church got hold of this idea of random acts of generosity and so decided to give flowering pot plants to every flat in the estate opposite the church – from where no one attended church.

First door they came to, man opened the door dressed only in a hat and trainers. "We've brought you a flowering pot plant from the church" said one lady.. "I don't want a pot plant" replied the man grumpily at which point another lady thrust a plant into his mid-riff and said "I think right now a pot plant is exactly what you need". Next door they rang the lady responded v.differently – "I've never been given flowers in my whole life" she said, deeply moved – guess where she was next Sunday?

What are priests for? To do all I've just said again and again. You know when my children were young I used to read to them that story "we're going on a bear hunt" – do you know it? It drove me nuts – every two lines that monotonous refrain "we're going on a bear hunt, we're going to catch a big one, I'm not scared". They've even set it to music. But my children loved it – they didn't mind the repetition, they kept saying "do it again" until I was nearly comatose. But maybe the problem is that grown-up people aren't strong enough to exult in monotony. But maybe God is. Maybe God every morning says to the sun "do it again", and to the moon at night "do it again". Maybe God has made every daisy different, and not got tired of doing so. Maybe He has the eternal appetite of infancy....maybe we have grown old and dulled, but our God is younger than we....and we like God are not to tire of the beauty, wonder and treasure that is found in God's story with us. And rehearse all this, because we are a forgetful people.

What are priests for? So much more. To be those who laugh at themselves rather than joking about others, to be those who sit loose of reputation and image, and so embody an intriguing freedom and joy. And to be those who are surrendering to God in ways which make God real to us. And all because we are a forgetful people Are you up to this? No, of course you're not up to this. But fortunately God is up to this, so lean on Him, and lean into Him, now and always. **He** will not forget you.

Deacons sermon: ambassadors

You've heard of a flock of sheep, a charm of goldfinches, maybe even an intrusion of cockroaches. Well there are other collective nouns such as a rash of dermatologists, a lot of auctioneers, a depression of weather forecasters. Could be a flush of plumbers, a sea of bishops, a mass of priests but I couldn't find the collective noun for deacons. Maybe it should be an embassy of deacons. Why? Because today you are being sent, in ambassadorial fashion to bear witness, to speak for, serve and represent another, namely God.

So three things that make for a good ambassador. (None of which involve giving Ferrero rochers)

First, Communicating the One who sent you and communicating His Word; Preaching is a pretty obvious way of doing this – Not of course that you'll always preach in ways that connect with everyone. I remember the most gripping sermon I ever heard in 1989 at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, NY, given by Calvin O. Butts – or as we called him, Calvin no butts, and only once was I distracted – by a man in the pew in front of me snoring. You will never be all things to all people and there will be times when you wonder if your words are anything to anybody. St Paul says we have treasure in clay jars – that's what we are, weak, fragile, crackable clay jars. Many who came to hear Paul were disappointed by him. His speech was stumbling, he stood there trembling, his hands no doubt shaking and his forehead oozing sweat. And you know what, thank goodness for that, and thank goodness when that happens to you – because then there can be no doubt who is holding you up there, loosening the tongue for the words to come out and doing something through your words that isn't about you, your slickness or cleverness, making it clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God's word not yours. As God's ambassador you're not pointing to anything very remarkable about yourselves. Rather you are to point to the God you see in Jesus Christ, and this is what people are looking for and hoping for. And the way you depend on His mercy and grace as you shake and sweat will point to our Lord more convincingly than any amount of poise or polish.

Second, representing the One who sent you. A well-known spiritual director Gordon Mursell, mentioned to me once someone who came to see him regularly and Gordon kept trying to show him how prayer was a conversation but the man kept glazing over. "What's the problem?" asked Gordon in the end. "The thing is", the man said, "deep down, I can't believe God would be interested in listening to me, because no one has ever been interested in listening to me". He is not alone, there are many who have no experience of anyone being interested in what they have to say. Maybe that's why some people pay £100 to be listened to for an hour. Maybe that's one reason for heightened levels of loneliness and isolation in our society these days. Whatever, you will be those who take an interest, representing a God interested enough, passionate enough and desirous enough of conversation with us for Him to come and pitch his tent among us.

Sometimes you'll have to help people correct misrepresentations of our God too. Basil Hume, who was a Cardinal and headed up the R.C. Church in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s tells of how as a young boy he and his four brothers and sisters had a strict Catholic upbringing. His mother for example, had a cookie jar in the pantry and said to the children, "you can have a cookie on feast days but not on other days and if you're tempted, remember, God is watching you". Well for 7 yr old Basil that was enough to terrorise him into staying away from the cookie jar, and he grew with his mother's image of God as a stern police-man. Later on in his adolescence he came across other images such as God as the good Shepherd, compassionate and caring. That led on to trying to make sense of the different images and in his mind he began to amend some of the cold, judging nature of the God of the cookie jar. Eventually Hume became a monk and spent much time in

prayer. One day, while praying, out of nowhere into his mind came a scene – he was standing in the pantry with his hand in the cookie jar – and at that very moment he heard God whisper in his ear “take two” He heard the Word made flesh, a word of hospitality, of generosity, of love. Does not the Word say “I came that you might have life in all its abundance?”

Third, as ambassadors you are to keep company with the One who sends you. Let me be plain, the *degree to which we stay in Jesus company is degree to which we make the right kind of difference in the world.*

And this includes serving others in Jesus’ company. Now this servant mindset isn’t easy – all our habits go in the opposite direction. Today we probably looked for a car park space closest to the cathedral (fat chance), for seats with a good view (or at least not directly behind a pillar) and after this to dash and secure a table at some restaurant before the crowd arrives (slim possibility). We do all these things instinctively, to be served rather than to serve; so changing our mentality is a tough call. The leadership writer John Maxwell tells of a conversation with his 7 yr old grandson about serving others, after which his grandson decided he would hold the door open for people whenever he could that next day and say to them “have a great day” as they went through. On the phone to his grandfather that evening he said “grandpa, I held the door open 44 times”. We see what we’re looking for – and he was looking for people to serve them – this shift to service and a service mind-set is part of your call too.

But what’s more, this is joyful company we keep. When Jesus rose from the dead, what do you think was the first thing he said? A vicar asked a group of seven yr olds this. A little girl’s hand shot up. “I know what He said: He said, ‘Tah-dah!’” Now she’s a budding theologian, she got the hats flung in the air exuberance of our Lord. The monk, Thomas Merton, one of the greatest spirituality writers the 20th century reckoned we take ourselves so seriously we squeeze out joy. There are exceptions, Pope John XXIII - made a saint a while back - was asked by a journalist when he was pope in the 1960s “how many people work at the Vatican?” To which Pope John replied, “about half of them”. Let the joy of the company we keep come through. After all, the most amazing thing we can imagine in human existence is unending fellowship of endlessly loving people- and in the persons of the Trinity, Father Son and Holy Spirit we have the most generous-hearted, joy-laden, vibrantly engaging personal company imaginable, beckoning us to share this life. So you embassy of deacons, as ambassadors of the most High, communicate, represent and keep company with the most stunning and joyful of realities – and be blessed in so doing.