

THE CHRISM EUCHARIST – MAUNDY THURSDAY 9th April 2009

A Sermon preached by the Rt Revd Humphrey Southern, Bishop of Repton

James' Ministry Development Review made interesting reading. He's clearly an enthusiast, a lover of the Lord, wanting nothing so much as to be near Jesus – sitting next to him in fact – and in this he's just like his brother, John, who is also in ministry. You could say they're two *thunderously* good ministers, in fact (and there's a clue, if you need one!).

But there are some areas of concern, some areas (in the elegant euphemisms of MDR-speak) 'for development'. The brothers' critical friends, assiduously filling in their Form Ds (don't worry if this means little to you at present – it soon will!) record a little concern about James' and John's bombast and ambition. Indeed, the latter (in the opinion of some) may even amount to power lust – there's some stuff about aspiring to judge the tribes of Israel that's a bit disturbing. And there's a view that the pair are a bit given to deflecting criticism. Their mother has been known to carry the can for them on occasion. Poor Mrs Zebedee! So there's something about self-awareness and self-confidence there, maybe.

All in all, one might conclude that James and John may have some considerable potential to be effective ministers and disciples, but there's work to be done yet – not least on their judging skills, as it happens.

And the real limitations of Ministry Development Review (you may be thinking) could be well demonstrated by the fact that the Gospel we've just heard read, set a little time after these concerns came to light, records that: 'a dispute ... arose among them [*again*] as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.'

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The Jesus who comes to us on Maundy Thursday is Jesus in, perhaps, his most demanding and arresting mode. Stripped of his garments of authority and girded with a servant's towel, with bowl and jug and down upon his knees in front of us he insists in deed and in demeanour on the truth he taught his disciples: 'I am among you as one who serves.'

He is the slave, we the master. He is the minister, we the ones to be pampered. It's an arresting approach which cannot be ignored and that's why it's demanding for (as Peter knew) it's not easy to be waited on.

It's not easy because there's nothing hidden from the servant. It was the French seventeenth century society hostess Mme Cournel who observed that no one is a hero to their valet and it's true. The One who kneels before us with ewer and basin, extending his hands and inviting us to place our feet in them will see and handle in that intimate service much that ordinarily (and decently) remains hidden.

'Show me,' he is saying, 'show me your life, your ministry – the story of it told in you knobbly, misshapen and grubby feet. Show me the callouses and the corns, the places where it hurts and irritates, where it pinches and does not fit very well. Show me the grime and the sweat – the soil in which you have trodden and travelled and the energy you have expended and what it has done to you.'

'Show me, too, the places where your feet are less worn, where you have trodden lightly or even not stepped out at all... Show me all this and thus let the story be told: because your journey is my journey and your labour, my labour – the triumphs, the challenges, the disasters, the little peaks and troughs, the sheer blooming grind – *all* this we share.'

And this – this act of service, intimate service, so uncomfortable to Peter, as to many others – this act that many of us will be re-enacting in one form or another later today – is how that shared responsibility and shared burden-carrying is expressed and accounted for and (in that expression and accounting) refreshed, of course, made whole, healed.

Any theology of ministry – and what is Maundy Thursday about, with its emphasis on renewing ordination vows, blessing holy oils and recalling the gift of the Eucharist, if not theology of ministry, of service – if it is to be faithful to the Gospel must be rooted in the insight that *all* ministry is Christ's. There is no 'my' ministry, or 'yours', or even 'the ministry of the Church'. There is only Christ's high servanthood, Christ's diaconate and priesthood and *episcopate* and we – in our Baptism primarily, and through our licensing and ordination – are partakers in it merely and solely by His grace and at His invitation.

'It is,' as St Paul says to the Corinthians in the passage we heard a few moments ago (2 Cor. 4 1), 'by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry', clay jars as we are, fragile, unlovely, somewhat rough around the edges, and dark places, indeed, from which the Gospel light may shine by God's grace. But essentially – and fundamentally by grace and mercy, by invitation and calling – we *do* partake and participate in the ministry that is Christ's.

And there is no higher calling than this.

This is the insight that lies at the basis of all our striving and struggling to imagine and create systems, structures and sacraments through and in the Church that will make a lived reality in our world of the saving truth that Christ's ministry mediates and reveals.

That's what Renewing Ministry and MMAs, Ministry Review and Fresh Expressions and Pastoral Reorganisation and the Church Representation Rules and Synods and a whole lot more (perhaps even Faculty Jurisdiction!) are *all*, somewhere at the heart of their intent, all about.

And in this moment – this offering and celebration – all this comes together and, knobbly, grimy, sometimes unlovely and often confused and compromised as it is, is placed into the hands of the One who kneels before us and takes it; breaking and blessing what we bring (which He first entrusted to us) and transforms it for the service of a needy, thirsty and bleeding world.

If it is true – as I find myself constantly rediscovering and asserting – that Church is always larger: wider, more exciting, perplexing, diverting, challenging and sheer extraordinary, than our own experience of it, then it is also true that none of us who ministers in the Church ministers alone or disconnected. And a key purpose of a celebrating and event like this is to give expression to that fact.

Ministry is 'ours' by gracious invitation of Christ, whose it was before and whose it always remains, and so it is of its very essence *collaborative* and *shared*. Our responsibility as organised Church must be to make a reality of that truth, inventing new ways where necessary and challenging old ones where they do not serve this insight.

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'We are afflicted in every way,' wrote St Paul to the Corinthians – could he have been writing to your MMA or Deanery Chapter? – 'but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed ... For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.'

In our shared and mutually accountable – mutually foot-washing – common life we not only take on the ministry of Christ to the world we inhabit in St Theresa sense as His loving limbs and organs, but also His ministry to one another as – for each other – 'One who serves'. Amen.