

**Sermon preached by John Beckett at St. Matthias'
for Ordination to Priest of Paul Barton 26th Sept 2015**

Readings: Isaiah 61:1-3; 2 Corinthians 5:17-6:2

What are you like when things are changing?

Some people love it, most of us are challenged by it –

Yet, since we know that change is the main sign of life, we know that we should expect things to keep changing!

Though, not everything does! The All Blacks still look pretty unbeatable. And the good old Church of England seems pretty resistant to changing—speaking personally, I'm not convinced that the priestly dress code gives the impression that we've moved into the 21st century!

and, I am sorry to disappoint you, the robes and things are not because you are changing into some sort of super Christian Paul and Paul, however – your ordination does mark a significant change for you.

It is much more than changing the way you wear your stole, the coloured scarf - you are taking on a significant change of responsibility.

As the Bishop said earlier:

“Priests are ordained (which means set apart) to lead God's people in the offering of praise and the proclamation of the gospel. They share with the Bishop in the oversight of the church...” and so on.

That might sound relatively straightforward to you? Simply a move into church leadership? Though Paul Evans, on finding yourself without a training incumbent a few months into your curacy might feel you are doing rather more of that than he had bargained for already!

But just wait until you add all the other things that you are supposed to be taking on the Bishop will describe to you in a moment:

servant, Shepherd, messenger, watchman, Steward, teacher, one who admonishes, searches for the lost, guides, is an evangelist, pastor...

Let alone the expectations of people in our congregations and the church at large trying to share the gospel with our neighbours in increasingly complex and secular society ...

I recommend Stuart Henderson's "Priestly duties" to you as it tries to explain some of this, and I quote a few lines:

What should a priest be?
an authority on singleness
Solomon-like on the labyrinth
of human sexuality
excellent with young marrieds,
old marrieds, were marrieds, never marrieds,
shouldn't have marrieds, those who live together, those who live
apart, and those who don't live anywhere
respectfully mindful of senior
citizens and war veterans,
familiar with the ravages of arthritis,
osteoporosis, post-natal depression,
anorexia, whooping-cough and nits. (At least Paul Barton as a
practicing GP has an edge there.)

Not such a simple change after all!

So to give you some stability, I wanted to remind you of two things that do not change today.

The first thing that does not change today is that you continue to be a deacon – a word that means to minister or to serve. Once a deacon, always a deacon. Whatever your role and responsibilities become as priests, a priest remains a servant of Christ in Christ's church.

The second thing that does not change is that even as leaders, priests remain followers. It's not all down to us.

The bishop reminded us that priests are to follow the example given to us of service, love and courage by Jesus the Good Shepherd. But even though the Middle Eastern shepherd would lead the flock by going ahead of them

to new places, we recall that in John's gospel, Jesus acknowledged himself to be, in a way, still a follower: He does what He sees the Father doing.

Henri Nouwen writes: "I am (also) getting in touch with the mystery that leadership for a large part, means to be led."

So, two things that do not change for you today: you remain a follower and a servant of Christ. Two things, as it happens that are also true of every Christian disciple.

But I really wanted to remind you of two things that are about to change that you really need to embrace, and continue to keep in heart and mind.

First is a responsibility to share God's longing for the world to change, for his kingdom to come. We heard it described in our first reading from Isaiah chapter 61, words that were echoed by Jesus at the synagogue in Nazareth, where he declared that these words had come into fulfilment in him.

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
To comfort those who mourn

Today you are given the fresh responsibility to lead God's people to work with the Holy Spirit to enable these changes to happen.

Today you take on the task of Voicing God's longing for the world to be different.

- For refugees to find a home
- for wars to stop
- for the sick to become well
- for the lonely to find friendship
- for the hungry to be fed
- for mourners to find comfort

- for people to come to know God and his great love for them through Jesus Christ

What an amazing change project God calls us to work with him in!

This is no private religion, no consumerist church, this is a movement needing courage and faith – little wonder William Carlisle, who the church commemorates today, began a Church Army.

The second gospel change for you as priests to lead the way in is greater again – though it may not at first hearing seem to be so, and again can be lost amid all of our day to day activities –whether in the parish or in the workplace.

Matt Barton read us these words from 2 Corinthians chapter 5.

*God was **reconciling** the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of **reconciliation...***

In Colossians, Paul goes further speaking about how in Christ **all things** are to be reconciled to God.

This reconciliation business is **the heart** of the Christian message.

Yet it is so easy to lose the enormity of this message.

I wonder, what do you first think about when we talk about reconciliation? As soon as I start thinking about the ministry of reconciliation, I am immediately reminded of all the day-to-day pastoral fire-fighting that seems to be so much part of the priests work, certainly in church terms, and it will be interesting to see how this ministry works out for Paul in his doctors' surgery...or for any one of us for that matter...

I think about trying to deal with the churchwarden who stopped coming to church because I produced a visual aid in a sermon. Or the tenant of a church property who had not paid his rent for a year. Or choosing music for church – ancient or modern? or what time to have the services, and even here, where do we put all the pianos we have!

I believe that the theologian Karl Barth spoke of Christian ministry as being similar to mending nets. Gathering and holding those things that are apart and that should be together.

And of course the task of trying to help bring together people who are alienated from one another ***or even alienated from God*** is an important part of parish priestly ministry.

And that is where it helps understand exactly what St Paul means in this term 'reconciliation'. The Greek word Paul uses is **not** one that simply means bringing loose ends back together again.

The word for reconciliation used here means "a complete change, in fact an exchange, it describes the move **from enemy to friend**.

It is not us, but the sin in us that is God's enemy; that causes us to be separated, alienated from Him.

But because of Jesus Christ on the cross, God no longer counts our sin against us, and enables the exchange, the complete change in our status from enemy to friend.

So, the heart of the Gospel message we are called upon to share is again about change.

²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to God.

Note that it's not about **us** bringing about reconciliation to God, but the priest is given the responsibility and opportunity to announce **what has already happened** and to show people how to accept what God has done so that they can change from being enemies of God to his friends.

Two things than that do not change today for you Paul and Paul, and indeed for each one of us here: you remain a Follower and a servant of God.

And two huge and wonderful changes you are called upon to proclaim and help to lead people into, both within and without of the church family:

You are to lead God's people, who are anointed by the Holy Spirit as Jesus was, to bring in God's kingdom where lives are changed for the better and secondly, as ambassadors of Christ proclaim God's offer of change from old to new, from enemy to friend, His awesome message of reconciliation for the whole world, for all things..

You also take on the responsibility for yourselves and for the people in your care that you have the discipline and obedience needed to maintain that friendship with God yourselves - as St Paul writes here in v1 of chapter 6, "do not receive this grace in vain".

And for each person here, it is my responsibility at this moment in time, to share with you that incredible invitation: be reconciled to God. Make the change!

And just as Isaiah wrote, and Jesus proclaimed, and St Paul urges in 2 Corinthians:

I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation or rescue. Now is the time to come home.

It is today, right now that God invites you, each one of us here, to join him in an exciting project to change the world!

It is today, right now that God, because of Jesus love for you and death on the cross for you, whether you've never known the friendship of God and only known fear and distance, or whether you are deliberately refusing to accept his offer, today, now, He offers you his hand of friendship.

What will you say to him today?

Prayer