

Sermon Preached on the Evening of 25th June - Revd David Scurr's first mass.

Some six years ago in consultation with our friends from the other churches in this town, we decided that what we needed to fulfil our ministry here was not another priest but an evangelist. We knew we had enough people with dog collars on and we needed someone who might lead us in new ways of reaching the people with the good news of Jesus – the gospel. In a strange accident – that perhaps really was the work of the Holy Spirit – a man called David Scurr was looking for a job as an evangelist being about to finish his course at the Church Army College. He came, we liked him and gave him the job. What we did not know at the time (although I must admit that a mutual acquaintance of ours warned me that this might be the case), David came with something growing in his heart – God had other plans for him – and gradually we all began to realise that David's true vocation lay in being a priest. For David it has been a long road, he has been through some very difficult times and there must have been moments when like Jonah he must have wanted to run away from the demands of God. Yet he has persevered – and with Clare's support – and with the support of many of you here tonight – he has reached a goal that for him is the fulfilment of his calling and for us a matter of great rejoicing. So the man who came to us because we did not want any more priests, has himself become one. God works in some wonderfully mysterious ways his wonders to perform.

I find it a privilege to preach at these times when my colleagues are celebrating the Holy Communion, the Eucharist, for the first time. I have done it now a number of times. It is therefore difficult for me to say new things and I apologise therefore to any of you with wonderful memories who will realise that what I say in this sermon has been said before – I am encouraged to do so however by a comment Pete made to me some time ago when he said that my sermon at the time of his first Eucharist persuaded one of his friends to become a priest and that they are indeed training for the priesthood at this very moment. If I can persuade anyone else to do so, I would be extremely glad – for two reasons: one is that the Church of England needs people to be priests – the other is that it is a truly wonderful calling and brings a huge amount of joy and satisfaction to one's life – what a great thing to be able to say about your job!

But all that is peripheral to what I need to say on this special occasion – not only for David but for this parish. The scholars will want to tell you that there is no point in the communion service that is more special, more holy, more sacred than any other. Well that may be on paper, but in reality there is that point when the priest takes the bread and wine and says the words of consecration that is the focus of all our worship. The priest does it not because he is more important than anyone else but because he has been given this task to do. In the totality of the ministry of God in which we all share as the priesthood of all believers, the priest is ordained for this special task: he dresses up in traditional costume to hide his personal identity and he says the words and does the actions as a dramatic event in which he performs on behalf of all the people of God. In doing so he does in the service what we believe he is in the whole of his or her life – that is to be a representative of the people to God – and the representative of God to the people.

This central part of the communion service has four actions – the priest first takes the bread, then he gives thanks, then the bread is broken and finally it is distributed, shared with the people. In doing that the priest not only re-enacts the last supper and makes the presence of Christ real in the bread and wine but he mirrors something of his own calling. Let me explain. And as I do this, addressing myself to David – I hope there may be something to spark a response in all our hearts.

The bread is taken – just as a priest is taken. Taken by God out of the community of believers and set apart for a job. It has been so for centuries. David, you are chosen by God not because you are any different from others or more special to him, but because God has a job for you within the ministry of the whole church. You are taken by God to be his representative – you are on the boundary between God and his people helping them to discover for themselves their own discipleship, their own calling, indeed their own priesthood.

Then the priest gives thanks. Nothing can be as important for a priest as to lead the people in acts of thanksgiving. I do not think we stress enough this aspect of our discipleship – at the start of the eucharistic prayer we have the priest telling the people to give thanks to the Lord our God to which the people reply “*it is right to give thanks and praise*”. One of the most crucial part of our job as priests is to remind people of what God has done for them through Jesus Christ and that at all times and in all places we should give thanks. The word “eucharist” indeed means thanksgiving and its prayer reminds us of how Jesus took bread and gave thanks – in the same way the priest leads the people in thanksgiving to God, which we pray will be reflected in the life of each member of the church community.

Then – and this is the hard bit – you need to be broken. Just as Christ’s body was broken on the cross in order for the world to be healed – so every priest needs to be broken. Priesthood is not a way of avoiding the ravages of this world – the opposite is true. A priest will become even more vulnerable, even more susceptible - you will be broken again and again and again. The late great spiritual writer Henri Nouwen in his book about the priesthood wrote about this brokenness of the priest – “*a deep understanding of his own pain makes it possible for the priest to convert his weakness into strength and to offer his own experience as a source of healing to those who are often lost*”. That is why we need to be broken – to be a source of healing to others – it’s a tough ask – but it is so worthwhile.

The final action is one of sharing. Sharing is also the essence of priesthood. For it is impossible to do without others and it is impossible without sharing it with others. You are called to give yourself to others – to lose yourself in service to God and to your people. Sometimes we feel resentful about this – sometimes we want to protest – it is though our life is not our own – that we are being invaded. But priesthood is about sacrifice – and if as you were exhorted to do this morning in the ordination service – if you keep the Good Shepherd as an example then you will know that priesthood is about sharing yourself with your flock and being there for them.

David – those of us who have had the privilege of serving with you in this parish and been your fellow pilgrims on the road – know that this will be a very special moment for you. You have come a long way both physically from your home in the north and more importantly spiritually and we salute your courage and faith in

the long journey you have taken to get to this point. I am confident that I can speak for everyone here in delighting in your calling to the priesthood – we look forward being led by you in this great act of worship and we pray that your priestly ministry may be one of great blessing to you and your family – we know it will be to us.