

Twenty second Sunday after Pentecost – 2018 (0800h)

The idea of priesthood is not a popular one in modern society and there are many reasons for this. Priesthood amongst other things speaks of sacrifice, of Institutions and hierarchy things that are on the nose to say the least. There is a pervasive cynicism about such things and this includes the Church which is called to demonstrate and proclaim a very particular kind of sacrifice, of institutional life and a very particular hierarchy.

As you all know along with Father Brown I am a habitual dog collar wearer as well as having a liking for the cassock! It is a conversation starter if nothing else! Folk do from time to time express surprise when I describe myself as a priest, particularly when I mention my wife and children in the same breath. 'Isn't that a catholic idea' they say, aren't you a minister or a Pastor or a Vicar?' Well yes I am all these things, sort of, but I have been ordained as a priest, that's what the Ordinal says and always has done.

*'Receive the Holy Ghost for the office and work of a priest in Church of God. So says the BCP'* and it is much the same in modern variations.

In creating the Ordinal its chief architect Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer stressed the ministry of the word and pastoral care. So the Anglican priesthood is a pastoral one. Anglican priests are not of a special caste which confers spiritual privilege and they are not called to a rabbinic or judicial office laying down the law as to belief and practise. It is a priesthood – that whilst retaining the authoritative, sacramental and mediatory functions, embodies the gentleness, the attention to human need, the listening ear and the solidarity in our human condition of the true Pastor. This is the model of priesthood that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews is speaking of it is a priesthood shaped by the priesthood of Christ. This is crucial – our institution, our hierarchy and our sacrificial life is Christ centred, it is cross shaped.

Mark in chapter 10 of his gospel that we are reading through at present is keen to point out Jesus' teaching broadly speaking on sacrifice, institution, and hierarchy on through the lens of sex, wealth and power things that when misused become an unholy Trinity. This week it is the misuse of power that Jesus deals with in response to that request by James and John - 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.'

This is one of those texts that requires some care. Jesus has been speaking about the fate that awaits him in Jerusalem. He describes in some detail what will occur, arrest, condemnation, abuse and execution. Despite this the Brothers Boanerges approach him with their request. It is important not to miss the significance of the words 'in your glory!' This

may have meant a number of things for the brothers. Remember they had been on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus they had had seen Moses and Elijah on Jesus' right and left so they may have been dreaming of heavenly glory. Or perhaps in the backs of their minds there was the idea of the Davidic kingdom of Israel renewed, the Romans overthrown and Jesus in charge. But for Mark writing his gospel, the glory of Jesus was the cross and John and James have asked to be on each side of Jesus in his glory! Jesus responds rather enigmatically – such places are for those for whom it has been prepared. 'And with him they crucified two bandits one on his right and one on his left.' Mark's telling of the passion of Jesus is filled with references to his kingship. For Mark this is the story of the enthronement of Christ, Jesus' royal status is wholly paradoxical. The brothers have blundered into this, the other disciples then have a go at them for wanting positions of 'authority,' clearly none of them get it! How can they?

So Jesus engages them, teaches them: 'whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.' Jesus turns upside down the idea of glory and greatness and power and in doing so reveals to us the very nature of God, Jesus is the priest par excellence.

There are many definitions of what it is to be a priest, but this one appealed recently: a priest is someone who in his or her friendship reveals to me the face of God. It worth being reminded that St Peter in his first letter writes "You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ ...the ordained priesthood is a representative one. Michael Ramsey wrote of the priest as displaying, enabling and involving. Displaying the commitment that is the calling of us all us, enabling through theological training and involving - whatever the priest does is done in the name of all the Church. In this way the ordained priest represents the People of God who are called to be a kingdom of priests, to be a people through whose friendship God can be seen and heard and experienced.

Today we celebrate the work of *our* welfare arm, of Anglicare. We could have used different readings: 'whatever you do to the least of these my brothers and sisters ministry that we express through the work Anglicare (among others) is one that begins with the cross. The self-giving of Christ revealed today in the Fourth Servant Song from the prophet Isaiah is our example. Jesus teaching on power and glory revealed in the cross calls us to the understanding that most important among us are those to whom we reach out to in a myriad of ways, those to whom we reveal the face of God.