

Who touched me?

28 6 09

Almighty God

give us the grace to dedicate our freedom to your service

that we and all creation may be brought to the glorious liberty

of the children of God

My text may be found in today's gospel from Mark, 'Who touched me?' (5 v 31)

Tomorrow, the 29th June, is Peterstide, the feast of Ss Peter and Paul. It is the principle time at which the Church ordains people to the priesthood or makes them deacons. Today, at St Barts, we are fortunate to be able to celebrate the 35th anniversary of the ordination to the priesthood of one of the retired priest who worships with us, The Revd Mervyn Kingston, the former Vicar Choral of Armagh Cathedral in Northern Ireland. Born in 1947, George Mervyn Kingston studied at the Church of Ireland Theological College in the early seventies, was made a deacon in 1973 and ordained priest the following year. He served his title as a curate in Comber in the Diocese of Down and Dromore between 73 and 77 then moved to a second curacy at St Donard's, Belfast, between 77 and 80. He then became a Minor Canon of Down Cathedral between 1980 and 1984 as well as being the Bishop's Curate for the Lecale Group between 82 and 84.

Mervyn had a penchant for working in difficult places. He moved to be Bishop's Curate of St Andrew's Glencairn in the Upper Shankill area of Belfast in the

Diocese of Connor for six years from 1984 to 1990. (Fifteen men from the parish were at that time serving long term prison sentences for serious paramilitary offences – more men than were in church on a Sunday morning. One area, Glencairn Road, was known locally as 'murder mile' because of the number of dead bodies that were dumped there. Most were victims of the notorious "Shankill Butchers" gang.)

In 1990, he moved on to be Incumbent of Ballymascanlan with Creggan and Rathcor in Armagh before ill health in 2003 forced him to take up light duties as Vicar Choral of the cathedral in Armagh till his retirement in 2007. Of the 3647 people who have died as a result of "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland, 240 were killed in Mervyn's parish in south Armagh, 123 soldiers, 42 policemen and 75 civilians. In addition, there were 1,255 bomb attacks and 1,158 shooting incidents. Despite this appalling catalogue of violence, the 1% protestant minority was largely left alone by the republican paramilitaries. Mervyn described the local situation as "living in the calm at the eye of the storm" and that the church in that place worked tirelessly for peace and reconciliation. The lesson is that the exercise of ministry/ priesthood is not just for your own congregation, however small, but is offered for the building up of the whole community without distinction.

Mervyn has spent the greater part of his adult life serving God as a priest in the Church of God and this morning briefly I should like to reflect on what it means to be a priest.

Being a priest is a question of being and of doing. Priesthood is no longer a question of gender since the Anglican Communion now admits both men and women to the priesthood. It is what a person is not their sex or sexual orientation that matters. But what is a priest?

A priest is a Christian who like all other Christians is someone on a journey, a fellow pilgrim travelling towards our final destination: the life of the world to come. A priest is a serious, committed traveller, someone who takes the trouble to learn about the journey, to be well informed about the route, the places on the way. He or she is like a guide who has read the guidebooks and tries to know, to be familiar with the way ahead. He's not just a part of a group; she tries to point the way to go. A priest, then, is like a guide.

A priest is like a teacher too. He is someone who in the process of learning about what it is to be a Christian teaches others about the Christian life. In the first half of the nineteenth century, my old School, Dame Alice Owen's, employed pupil monitors to pass on what they had learnt to younger pupils. Priests are teachers in this sense: teaching what they know while at the same time continuing to learn themselves. They are essentially literate in the faith; they should be familiar with the Bible and largely understand what they read and be able to communicate their understanding clearly and effectively to others.

A priest should be articulate. He should be able to speak to God daily in prayer and help people in their own prayer life. She should be able to lead public worship and to preach sermons which inform, encourage and challenge. He

should be able to talk to people where they are, to talk with them not at them, and by what she says, help others.

Essentially priests are Christians for whom God is real and who should be making God real to others. Like doorkeepers, they should be opening the door for others to pass through.

Three things only are particular, peculiar, to the office of a priest: absolution; benediction and consecration. Absolution is to extend on behalf of God his forgiveness to others. It is to wash away the dirt of sin and the grime of wrongdoing and to make people clean before God. Benediction is to bless: to dedicate someone or something to God. It is to make holy the everyday, invoking the presence of God into the mundane, bringing the eternal in the temporal. Consecration is similar to blessing: it is literally making something holy, dedicating it to God. In a priestly context, consecration is the word used to describe to the part of the Eucharist where the elements of bread and wine are transformed from the ordinary into the extraordinary: either the real presence of God or symbols of that presence.

In conclusion I believe that a Priest is as human as we all are, capable of all the short-comings which go with the territory of being an adult. But a priest is someone who is trying seriously to live the Christian life and in trying to live that life, will try to proclaim anew to his or her generation the truth of the existence of God. In the middle of a crowd, Jesus asks 'Who touched me?' for he felt the

healing power flow from him. A priest is someone who is touched by God and who tries to bring that touch to others.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

28th June, 2009

H: Sermon 20: Who touched me

