

**Sermon by the Revd Mervyn Kingston,  
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19 6 11

This is the time of year when we think of Ordination and Ordination anniversaries, and so we congratulate Canon Roger Gilbert, who will be 40 years ordained next week, along with clergy we know from other parishes. With them we also remember the faithful lay ministry of Diocesan Readers, especially our dear friend Sybil Fagg, for 15 years Reader in this place, who died on Monday. Sybil was a person of energy and vision. She was the anchorman in the parish, who knew what needed to be done to keep everything in smooth working order, and offered wise and discreet advice to the many clergy who came here for one month at a time. May she rest in peace.

Today is an opportunity for us to reflect, in advance, on how ministry has changed over the last 40 years, so I would like to offer three observations.

The first is for Gareth's benefit. Being a half-time clergyman often means that you receive half pay, but end up doing a full-time job. So Gareth, while it is good to be generous with your time, do be careful to guard your time off.

Secondly, many parish clergy have become administrators, and have given up on parish visiting. This I think is a mistake, which

substantially weakens the scope of the ministry that we offer. It remains true what theological students were taught 40, 50 and even 60 or more years ago, “that a house going parson makes a church going people.”

Thirdly, the primary task of Bishops is to care for the pastoral needs of the clergy. Yet the church has allowed this essential task to be transferred to others, such as a diocesan pastoral care group. The reason for this is to separate out the function of line manager and care giver. This may suit some, but not all. In most Dioceses also, pastoral care of the retired clergy and clergy widows is delegated to a chaplain, because of the increasingly large numbers of those who are retired. In both cases the role of the Bishop is diminished. Although the Bishop will undertake to come and see you himself during the week before you die, as long as you give him notice!

In 1970, John Hayes whose father had been coachman to the Bishop of Tuam before 1914, met the newly appointed Bishop of Down (George Quin) in High Street Belfast, and said to him “Bishop, you do not look dressed without your top hat and gaiters.” We have to think whether we want to be a church that constantly looks back to the past with nostalgia, or engages with the issues of the present.

Three observations then, and a small request. The request is in terms of the ministry that we offer to each other. It is just to remind you, – both today and every Sunday – after the service, would you please

introduce yourself to one person that you do not know. This small gesture can make a real difference in helping others to feel welcome and helping us to get to know each other. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit..." John 15.13, 16.

The true story is told by the Rev. Desmond Gilliland, a retired Methodist minister who died just two years ago in Dublin. Desmond was one of the great heroes of the faith, who worked in China in Heang Zhoe in 1948. When the Communists came to the village, the Chinese Christians fled, however one Chinese pastor came back to make sure that the European missionaries were all right. On his way back he was shot and injured by the Japanese. He was then arrested by the Communists and imprisoned. He was later asked by them to denounce the missionaries as "western imperialists". He refused to do this, and as a result he was executed for his faith by the new Chinese authorities. I find this a very moving and challenging story, in contrast to what passes for being important in the life of many of our parishes.

The three dominant words in our Gospel reading today are choice, friendship and love. What that Chinese pastor put first, before his personal safety, and paid for with his life. Choice, friendship and love, which were also an essential part of the ministry offered by our dear friend Sybil.

Listen to what Jesus says to his disciples. First, Jesus said, "I chose you and appointed you." The doctrine of divine election runs through the Bible and, even though it has been misunderstood and misused, it reminds us of an important truth. It is God who takes the initiative, not us – ours is the response. When the people of Israel were chosen to be God's people it wasn't to give them special privileges or social advantages over others. Rather it was being chosen for a task – to be a light to the nations – to share the news of God with others. Here, Jesus says "I chose and appointed you" – the two go together. Disciples are chosen from the world to be his, and sent back into the world to announce his kingdom. This stops this divine election being a way of excluding others. They are chosen not for privilege but for responsibility and service.

Secondly Jesus said, "You are my friends not servants." The disciples are referred to as servants two chapters earlier – now he promotes them. They are his friends. The change of title doesn't excuse them from obedience, but it brings a difference to the kind of obedience. A slave or servant obeys his master without knowing the reason for his master's command. Those serving in the armed forces are taught to obey orders, not to question them. But the obedience of a friend is different. It includes understanding. Our Lord took his close followers into his confidence. Mark distinguishes between the crowd and his close disciples. Of the crowd, he says "he told them as much as they could understand. He would not speak to them without using

parables, but when he was alone with his disciples, he would explain everything to them."

Thirdly Jesus said, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." It's surprising to discover how few commands were actually given by Jesus. So much of his teaching is in the form of questions or stories, and very little in the form of orders. The exception is the command to love. Here he is quite specific – to love as he loves – to produce a quality like his. This is to be the distinctive mark of his disciples.

We can notice how today's gospel passage is wrapped in love. Verse 12 and verse 16 express it all: "My command is this: love each other. This is my command love each other." just in this way is the whole of Christ's ministry wrapped in a quality of love unique in the world.

Choice, friendship and love, three words to take home. We are chosen to serve as his friends and commanded to love one another, as Christ loves us. "See how these Christians love one another" may often be used in justifiable criticism. May our lives as Christ's chosen friends, like that of the unknown Chinese pastor, and of our friend Sybil, prompt the same words in sincere admiration, for such love bears fruit – fruit that will last.