



## Hello, I must be going... <sup>1</sup>

As this is my last sermon in this place as a licenced member of its clergy team I hope it's OK to depart from some usual self-imposed strictures.

I'm a believer that less is more, and have always tried to be a (relatively) concise preacher; I have tended to take the Gospel of the day as setting the direction; and I have been auto-biographical with restraint, and only to the extent of my conviction that preaching should be concerned with the dialectic - the conversation - set up between the claims of faith and our own lived lives.

I want, then, to share some thoughts, but still to do what every preacher must always do: to point beyond themselves to the mystery of the God whom we believe is most fully revealed in Christ.

The other day I visited Westminster Archive and looked up the Register of Services, to discover that I first preached here on 27 September 1992. I had been ordained three years earlier and had served a curacy in Hackney. I could have remained there indefinitely since the Church tended to leave unpaid clergy to their own devices. But I knew that if I were to grow in the role, I should look out for other challenges.

It was by chance (let's for the moment leave aside whether anything in this great adventure is ever only chance), that in 1992 I was invited to an event at The Groucho Club. I turned up from work, in suit and tie (I'd been in court that day in a care proceedings case - I was then managing a social work team in the East End). I got talking to another

guest, also in suit and tie, who turned out to be Donald, the then rector here. We talked about faith, life and the Church. He said "come and work at St James's".

I wrote to the Bishop, David Hope. A day later he telephoned me: "are you sure you want to go St James's? It's goes in for frothy religion". I thought it a telling fact about his style that he 'phoned a mere curate, and a non-stipendiary one at that. He didn't elaborate on the description 'frothy'. He had no objection but suggested I should go along on a few Sundays, and case the joint. And that is what Stephen and I did.

It was quite an experience, weirdly and fascinatingly different from what I had been used to. Two people delivered the intercessions, for which one of the pricket stands, aglow with votive candles, was manoeuvred here into the central aisle.

The prayers dealt with the evils of unbridled capitalism and patriarchy, and the concluding doxology took the form of burning a couple of five pound notes. No one seemed remotely fazed by this, or worried by a missed Gift-Aid opportunity.

The following Sunday an art installation hung by wires over the altar. It was holographic, and so appeared to change shape and proximity as you moved in relation to it. It represented the Great Earth Mother and portrayed, in a little too much detail for some, the birth canal.

Welcome, I thought, to St James's Piccadilly.

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<sup>1</sup> Animal Crackers (1930): sung by Groucho Marx

We were not put off. I sensed then aspects that have since made me love this place and its life: liturgy that is structured but not manicured; a place where our deepest experiences may be examined in the light of the Gospel without reserve or shame; a community of very varied people which, for me, has turned out to be about the best experience I've ever had of community, friendship and (this is a tricky word, but the right one here) family.

It was not easy going to start with. I am not by temperament a performer, and along with the other estimated 25-40 percent of society, I'm at the introversion end of the scale. I had become used to celebrating the eucharist whilst having the congregation a comforting distance away in the pews: being entirely surrounded by them spooked me. And preparing sermons for such attentive and engaged listeners caused me stress and anxiety. I did not feel up to the job, and for a time wondered if I should leave.

Speaking of job, I should explain a little of the context. In my late twenties I'd been surprised by a thought that I perhaps should be ordained. I was not long into being a social worker, something I reckoned to be, itself, a vocation.

I spoke to a few friends: a Mirfield monk called Aelred; a Quaker White Witch called Marion; and to my beloved mate John, an Australian former cattle-rancher, turned alcoholic turned 'permanently abstinent remarkable human being' who, having had any belief in God beaten out of him at school by sadistic nuns, was a confident atheist. All of them encouraged me.

To begin with I had no conceptual framework for thinking about ordination beyond the then (and still) dominant orthodoxy that clergy forsake any pre-existing jobs to "go into the church". There was in those days no internet to research options. But then another 'by chance' moment: I stumbled on an article about the French worker-priests,

clergy who operated without the visible signs of their office or calling, alongside ordinary people who had forsaken the church (or maybe had been forsaken by it).

Their purpose was not to proselytise but to be immersed and alongside; not to administer the sacraments but to witness to the sacramental in all human possibility; and in some understated (even disguised) way to be the Church in places where, in its institutional form, the Church was absent.

That more than caught my attention. It allowed me to combine vocations, not choose between them. And for the last 30 years that has given shape to my approach to what the Ordinal calls *'the Office and work of a priest'*.

I cannot make any great claims for what I have made of that office, but I can make claims about what it has made of me. I am hugely grateful (*really* grateful) for all it has taught and shown me, for all the people I have encountered, for the ways in which it has changed me. Very high on this list is gratitude for having washed up here, at St James's, more than 27 years ago. Thank you Donald for inviting me; thank you Charles and thank you Lucy for allowing me to stay.

It would take too long to list things I treasure about this sometimes-bonkers place, though that list would include amongst others these things liturgical: the Gospel always proclaimed by laity, not reserved to clergy; our surrounding the altar for the Eucharistic Prayer (some find the description of this just trendy but the experience for many of us here is profound and illustrative of something true about God's invitation to each of us); clergy and servers making their communion after everyone else, not before; and the Blessing and Dismissal being done from the West End, as we ready ourselves to re-engage with God's world.

Also on the list would be the kind of Christian community that has evolved here, and the

people who, because of that, are drawn here. For the last 35 or so years St James's has been known as a progressive, inclusive and liberal church. For those uncertain about coded church-speak, it means that a serious effort is made to link liturgy, preaching and 'church life' with our unadorned, uncurated, lived human experience; it means that women are taken seriously as equal partners in the adventure of faith, and beyond; it means the politics tend to be towards the Left (though that's neither compulsory nor in fact always the case); it means that LGBT people form part of our community, not as welcome aliens or defective heterosexuals, but as recognisably family, one of us.

'Inclusion' and 'inclusive' are current buzzwords, and whilst suffering from casual overuse nonetheless point to a serious intention: to affirm our shared humanity rather than to fear, or focus on, our differences. The operative belief is that the tent is big enough for us all (it really is), and we should welcome and make room for one another. Isn't that, in summary, a fair reading of the Gospel?

Not that I'd want to give the impression that this place is perfect! *Oh no*. Over the years there have been dramas of many kinds, fallings out here and there. We can be demanding, self-centred and irritating. We quite often end up with too much activity and too little contemplation. We're sometimes so driven to fix the world that we forget to fix ourselves. We think up new projects without always considering the resources needed, and so overburden our staff or ourselves.

*Yet somehow it mostly turns out right*. Over the years I have observed so much fun and plain human goodness here. It has been, and remains, an exploring community, explicitly Christian but not doctrinairely so; a place where people feel welcomed, cared for and challenged.

Observing and participating in this endless stream of activity and liturgy over these years, I have sometimes thought of words found in the prologue of the Rule of St Benedict: *"Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord's service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome."*

Of all the claims of the Christian faith it is the wondrous story of the Incarnation that most comforts and drives me. It is an astonishing thing to believe that this God whom we suppose, entered our human flesh in the form of a child in order to share our humanity. I consider this and see everything in a changed light. Suddenly every created thing is shot through with glory and significance. The universe, at its cellular and atomic and sub-atomic levels, becomes imbued with this God who takes it all so seriously, and for love's sake. How is it possible not to be astonished, to take more seriously ourselves, one another, all life forms and this amazing planet, when viewed through this perspective? It makes our hearts sing. And even when we forget it, or when it is obscured by our fear or suffering or grief, it remains a truth to live by, and will again come into view.

*"Prayer is not a discourse. It is a form of life, the life with God..."* says Jacques Ellul. Amen to that. Prayer is hardly ever related to words called prayer, but to our whole being's response to this elusive God whom we cannot see but whom we can detect in other ways and who entered the very fabric of our bodies and lives and world.

I sent a letter to many friends when I announced my departure. I tried to be clear about what I was doing, but perhaps I was not clear enough. I keep being asked about my retirement, but I'm not retiring (and I'm certainly not 'stepping back' to use the absurd cliché currently so popular). What I'm doing is quitting work as a priest who is licensed to a parish.

The reason is this: my vocation was to be a worker priest and I expect to finish paid work in a two or three years. Once I do that, I reckon that being faithful to my reading of my vocation means it will be right to leave the institutional expression of that call.

Since my working life and my serving in a parish – this parish – have been so very important to me (important, let me stress, by being *in dialogue* with each other) I don't want to stop each at the same time. It would be too much of a gear change, and loss. So I am going now, in the 30th year of my ordination.

I am not resigning my orders. I hope to become a feral priest of sorts - feral meaning a return to a wilder state after a period of domestication. I have long sensed that, despite its best and sincere efforts, much institutional church life tends towards domesticating the Gospel and our engagement with it. It is hard to avoid.

In that same letter I quoted Tony Benn who, on resigning his seat as an MP, said that he was leaving parliament to get better involved in politics. And there's some of that in my thinking: I have never seen the institution of the church and Christian faith as exactly one and the same thing, and I've suspected that for some of us, at certain times, it may be necessary to detach slightly from the institution the better to hope to understand the Gospel.

The church is not bad (indeed, in so many ways it is wonderful); it has been and is the keeper and bearer of the faith over centuries.

But the church as the company of the faithful is larger than the institution, and when led to explore the claims of the Gospel beyond it, we should respond. I'm not sure where this will lead me, but I am excited by it.

Today's Gospel speaks of something of this: let's listen again to part of it: *"The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day."*

Next Sunday is my final fixture here (Lucy will be preaching and I shall be presiding), and that will be the time for me to express my thanks to many of you who have so enriched these years for me and for Stephen. Of our 28 years together, 27 have been spent in and around this community, and we owe you so much. As a priest called to have an equally serious focus on his so-called secular employment – the world beyond the institution - being here has been one of the most wonderful experiences of my life. Thank you.

*Glory to God, Source of all being,  
Eternal Word and Holy Spirit:  
as it was in the beginning, is now,  
and shall be for ever. Amen.*