

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba

Address to Ordinands

8 December 2009

[Melvyn Welby Solomon and Patricia Van der Rede are being ordained to the Priesthood. Both were at Goudini, I believe.]

Dear Patricia, dear Melvyn, I just want to share a few reflections with you, on what it is to be a priest in the Church of God.

Our starting point is this – it *is* God's Church, and it is to his service, and the service of his people, that we are called.

The initiative is on God's side.

Ordination is not something we can earn, nor something we can deserve – it is entirely gift.

It is important to remember this!

We need to remember it if we are in danger of getting too big for our boots, or throwing our weight around, or thinking that priesthood is all about us.

But on the other hand, we also need to remember it on those days when everything seems too much; when we doubt ourselves and our capacity to live up to God's call.

If – no! when – you have days like this, for they come to us all, remember the Old Testament reading from Morning Prayer today.

The Prophet Amos says,

'I am not a prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, "Go, prophecy to my people Israel".' (Amos 7:14,15)

It does not matter to God what our background is, what status our parents had in society, what professions we have followed.

What matters is that God has called us, and sent us to serve his people.

Ultimately it is all down to God!

Therefore it is vital that we cultivate habits of dependence upon him.

For ordained ministry means nothing less than doing what God wants us to do, in the way God wants us to do it, in God's strength, and in God's own perfect timing!

This is of course impossible: impossible for us on our own; but nonetheless this is what God delights to work in us, as we abide in him.

The best means of such abiding is to immerse ourselves in prayer and Scripture.

When you were ordained Deacons, you were asked:

Will you be faithful in prayer, and in the reading and study of the holy Scriptures?

And on Sunday, you will be asked:

Will you be diligent in prayer, in reading holy Scripture, and in all studies that will deepen your faith and fit you to overcome error by the truth of the gospel?

There is only one answer that makes sense – 'With God's help, I will'.

God will indeed help us – but we must make the effort to keep our side of the bargain!

So, above all else – pray and read your Bibles.

Pray faithfully, diligently, devotedly – pray as much, and in as many ways, as you can.

You will remember, I hope, what I said at Goudini, about prayer being an act of love; and an act of commitment, when we take the trouble to 'show up' and spend time consciously in God's presence.

We should not worry about how inspiring or how boring it feels; we should not attempt to measure how successful our praying is, in terms of how focussed or how distracted we are.

We must just get into the habit of showing up, as often as we can, as a mark of our dependence on God – because this is what opens us up to

receive from God all the directing, empowering and equipping, which God delights to share with us.

And whatever you do, do not ever neglect the offices of Morning and Evening Prayer.

I don't know whether your training, or your year as a Deacon, has helped you develop the daily rhythm whereby they get under your skin.

But, whatever else you do, stick at it – so that it feels almost as if you have forgotten to brush your teeth, or wash your face, or some other essential part of starting the day, if you fail to begin with Morning Prayer!

Now I do not want you to be naïve or superstitious about this – almost treating the daily readings like some sort of horoscope!

But I want you to be aware that the Holy Spirit miraculously uses our lectionary, again and again and again, to speak directly into whatever situation we face, if we have ears to hear – if we are prepared not just to whiz through the readings with our mind half on the tasks of the day ahead, but instead to sit and pause and let the words speak to us.

It is here, above all else, that I find the resourcing I need for my own ministry. Sometimes it also provides a message to share with others – but first of all, it is me that needs such feeding and sustaining.

So, for example, I have already quoted Amos, from Morning Prayer today.

Then in the Revelation to St John we had a picture of Jesus with a two-edged sword coming from his mouth.

And of course, we also speak of Jesus as the Word of God, and of Scripture as being a two-edged sword, living and active, that cuts through to our very essence, judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Heb 4:12).

It is another reminder, should we need it, of the need to root and ground our lives in the reading of the Bible, God's living word.

And, as you say the Offices, allow yourselves to fall in love with the Psalms.

We say them all through pretty much once every six weeks.

And yet it is amazing how often that they have just the right words.

This morning's Psalms were 26 and 27. I wonder if they made any impact on you as you read them.

I'm going to suggest that sometime between now and Sunday you go back to them again, and ponder them in the light of the calling to priestly ordination.

They each have a glorious mix of the ups and downs of the life of faith – yet keep coming back to the centrality of abiding in God: as Psalm 26 verse 8 puts it 'Lord, I love the house of your habitation, the place where your glory dwells.'

With this comes the reassurance that, as the first verse of Psalm 27 says, 'The Lord is my light and my salvation: whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life: of whom shall I be afraid?'

And though hard times are bound to come – though not, we hope, an entire army camped against you (27:3 – if you do desire to dwell in the house of the Lord for ever, to see his fair beauty and seek his will in his temple, then he will indeed hide you under his shelter in the day of trouble' (from 27:4,5,6)

So, Marwyn and Pat,

Will you be diligent in prayer, in reading holy Scripture, and in all studies that will deepen your faith and fit you to overcome error by the truth of the gospel?

With the help of God, may it indeed be so.

May the days of your retreat be a wonderful time of resting in the Lord, and knowing his call upon your lives; and may Sunday be a glorious service of affirmation of God's call upon your life, your readiness to respond, and his undertaking to lead you in his even paths (Ps 27 again, verse 14).

Let me end with the final verse of Psalm 27

O wait for the Lord, stand firm and he will strengthen your heart – and wait, I say, for the Lord.

Amen