



ORDINATION SERVICE

ADDRESS

Methodist Conference 2013

Wesley College

Te Hāhi Weteriana O Aotearoa

Ordination Service Address

Sunday 6 October 2013

Wesley College

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*“Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye,
but do not notice the log in your own eye?”*

Luke 7:3

Soon after Rowan Williams arrived at Lambeth to take up his ministry as Archbishop of Canterbury, he attended a meeting of the House of Bishops. They were engaged in continuing education and had invited theologian, Elizabeth Templeton, to address them. She recounted a challenge that was put to those applying for positions in her faculty. Imagine what you would say to a man who came up to you in the street and said, “My bus leaves in two minutes. Tell me about the resurrection in the time remaining.”

The bishops were invited to spend time together reflecting on this. Later Dr Templeton shared with them the answer that they were hoping to hear. “If you really want to hear about the resurrection, be prepared to miss your bus.” Rowan William’s biographer, Rupert Shortt records that at this point Rowan began to scratch his head - sure sign that he thought that a better answer was possible. Then the new archbishop came up with his own response. “I think I would have asked the man where he was going, then said that I would accompany him on the journey.” [1]

Today the church gathers to give thanks for those who have come to the point of ordination. It is the sacrament of baptism that gives us all an assured place in the community of Christ: it is through baptism that we all share in living the gospel life. The international Anglican-Methodist document *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion* reminds us that “whereas in baptism the people of God are turned outwards toward the world where Christ leads us, in ordination some of the baptised are

set apart to serve the gospel within the Church itself, by the faithful preaching of the word and administration of the sacraments.” [2]

One way to understand the ministry of the presbyter is to describe it as accompanying the people of God on their journey. The presbyter is appointed to accompany a people in a certain time and place. As presbyters we are called to share their journey: to enter their lives and make space for them in our lives. As we accompany people and gain their trust, we will be invited into their inner lives, which I have come to appreciate as being as beautiful and chaotic as the world outside. Accompanying people in this way is a fearful responsibility and a wonderful privilege. One pilgrim accompanies another pilgrim within the community of Christ.

In this relationship of trust we may find that we can share our personal journey in teaching, preaching and conversation. We are also called as presbyters to share the biblical vision of a transformed creation. The scriptures reveal to us that God’s interest is in the renewal of every heart and also the renewal of the heart of our societies and creation itself. It is the joy and the burden of the presbyter to share God’s vision with the people of God. When many of the forces within our communities are drawing us toward ideologies that entrench self-interest, the vision that we find in the prophets and in Jesus himself is a vision that stretches hearts, and souls and minds.

It is not necessary to be a poet to be a presbyter, but it certainly helps to have some poetry in us if we are to respond to the vision that is set before us. For the language of the vision is not theoretical or philosophical: the language of vision is metaphorical and poetic. And this is the language of faith and hope. The prophets held before the people visions of shalom, of a day when “they shall beat their swords into plough shares and their spears into pruning hooks; ... neither shall they learn war anymore.” (Isaiah 2: 4) They looked for the day when “the wolf and the lamb will feed together - when the lion shall eat straw like the ox.” (Isaiah 65: 25) Here is the conviction that the very structure of reality will be transformed: ancient enmities will persist no longer.

In the long line of the prophets of Israel, Jesus continued this tradition of setting before the people the vision of the coming of the kingdom of

God - the reign of God. "People will come from east and west, from north and south to eat in the kingdom of God." (Luke 13: 29) In Jesus the vision of God's purposes is seen in parables of the waiting father, of workers paid similar wages for different hours of work, and the Jew who is ministered to by his Samaritan enemy. When other visions are at work powerfully infiltrating the consciousness of the pilgrim people, the presbyter is called to set forth the vision of Jesus in word proclaimed, in sacrament celebrated.

And yet the vision becomes more deeply counter-cultural when we take the cross seriously. Through the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus we discover that the vision of God's new creation does not come without the pain of sacrifice, the cost of reconciliation. In our work as presbyters we do not have the freedom to ignore the cross of Christ and are called to struggle with what it says to us today. We will want to point to the rejection of violence and torture, but also to the profound way in which God has chosen to be with us and among us. It is the ministry of the presbyter to point to the way in which God has chosen to embrace suffering at the heart of the world, and to confront the powers of darkness. Through Christ God's vision of shalom becomes cross shaped: through Christ the reign of God takes the shape of resurrection.

In the Wesleyan tradition we have spoken of the vision of God as involving both personal and social transformation. The presbyter seeks to find ways in which parish communities can be open to this reality. Behind the vision of God's purpose expressed poetically we discover an understanding of God which we have spoken of in terms of grace. This grace - generosity beyond expectation, forgiveness beyond calculation, gift beyond anticipation - is our experience. The vision of God's grace requires us to incorporate the impoverished, the neglected and the vulnerable, within the practice of our local Christian communities.

The presbyter is ordained and appointed to help the church wrestle with God's vision. The vision can be sidelined, ignored, forgotten: the vision can be domesticated and romanticised. It takes courage to serve such a distinctive vision. God's vision fosters an alternative consciousness with sharp counter-cultural implications. Steindl-Rast says vision without action is barren; while action without vision will run in circles. [3] There will be times when you will not be thanked for calling for an

appreciation of the view from below. You will be criticised for suggesting that the church should have a preferential option for the poor. The church is present where God's vision is named, embraced and lived. God's vision is authentic where it disturbs, unsettles and troubles us.

Keeping the vision alive - keeping our vision clear constitutes a major challenge. Jesus asks us, "Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" (Matt. 7:3) Here Jesus is calling on us to have a clarity of sight. Many things can distort our vision - we can deceive ourselves, we can be tricked by our own self-interest. One way to understand the Christian life is to seek to see the world as God sees it, to embrace God's vision for the world. Jesus wants us to give attention to the way we see, before we concern ourselves with the way others see.

We receive help in keeping the vision alive through prayer. William Blake claimed, "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything will appear ... as it is, infinite." [4] This can only be done if the presbyter develops and sustains a life of prayer. Jim Cotter, who has done so much in the Church of England to support gay and lesbian people says, "The heart of the work of the ordained minister is to pray and to teach others to pray." [5] Being open before God, remaining open to the work of the Spirit, coming to see the world through grace healed eyes, will be truly transformative. As presbyter you will subvert unjust reality by nurturing prayerful imagination.

Through the weekly encounter with the gospel the presbyter sets before the people of God the strange yet compelling vision of the grace of God. Through presiding at baptism you will witness the renunciation of personal agendas. Through presiding when the people of God share bread and pour wine, an alternative vision is set forth, enacted and experienced - a demonstration of the economy of grace. Through the prayer that is offered and encouraged the transforming vision will purify our priorities and provide energy for compassion. In these ways, as presbyters, you are called to accompany the people of God and keep alive the distinctive vision in the context in which you find yourself.

Evelyn Underhill told the story of two people who took a walk - their names were Eyes and No-Eyes. "No-Eyes has fixed his attention on

the fact that he is obliged to take a walk. For him the chief factor of his existence is his own movement along the road; a movement which he intends to accomplish as efficiently and comfortably as he can. He asks not to know what may be on either side of the hedges. He ignores the caress of the wind until it threatens to remove his hat. He trudges along, steadily, diligently; avoiding the muddy pools unaware of the light which they reflect.

Eyes takes the walk too: for him it is a perpetual revelation of beauty and wonder. The sunlight inebriates him, the winds delight him, the very effort of the journey is a joy. Magic presences throng the roadside, or cry salutations to him from the hidden fields. The rich world through which he moves lies in the foreground of his consciousness; it gives up new secrets to him at every step. No-Eyes, when told of Eyes' adventures, usually refuses to believe that both have gone by the same road!" [6]

1. Rupert Shortt, *Rowan's Rule - The biography of the Archbishop* (London: Hodder, 2009), p. 321.
2. *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion* 1995, para. 41.
3. David Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), p.66.
4. Quoted by John Main, *Word into Silence* (London: DLT, 1980), p.16.
5. Ed. John Wilkins, *How I Pray* (London: DLT, 1993), p. 28.
6. Quoted by Kevin Coughlin, *Finding God in Everyday Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p.58.