

From Deacon to Priest

Some reflections - Revd Craig Grocock

July 2006 – Ordination

In many ways this last 12 months has flown by. Being caught up in so many different experiences of ministry, meeting new people and adjusting to a totally new way of doing ministry has accelerated the year quite incredibly.

In other ways the year has seemed to drag by as I waited for the ordination service to come around again.

It has felt quite strange, since being ordained deacon last year, being in what has felt like a 'waiting mode' for me – waiting for the fulfillment of God's call on my life. And yet this has been a significant time. As I write this at the beginning of Advent, with the season's emphasis and richness being around waiting, watching, hope and expectancy, I have come to a deeper understanding this last year on what (in part I think) the Deacon's year is about. As well the servant role of diaconal ministry, for me this last year has been entering into this waiting mode of ministry – waiting, as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane for the fulfillment of God's purpose and will, waiting for God's fulfillment and purpose to come into being at ordination. The Deacon's year has shown me the importance of humility, which ideally underpins the ministry of the Deacon. The year is there not simply as a year of foundational training but a period for reflecting on the full meaning of servant hood, humility and patience!

When the ordination eventually arrived I once again was struck by the privilege and responsibilities that were to be given to me. For a number of months before the service I had been using the Declarations and preface to the ordination of priests during my prayer and quiet time as part of the process of preparation so they were fairly familiar once I came to the service itself. I continue to read these each Friday where possible as part of my on going spiritual development.

I continue to be awed somewhat as I read the preface (the priest's job description!) and in many ways will never be able to fulfill what it describes. I guess this is true for all priests though – we will never fulfill this but then maybe that's right, for if we do then we have arrived!

But I am struck by what the Bishop says later on in the service; 'You cannot bear the weight of your calling in your own strength, but only by the grace and power of God'.

For me July 2006 was the fulfillment of God's call – to be a priest in the church of God.

But what has this begun to mean for me?

A change of role and function

There have been the obvious 'added' dimensions firstly to my liturgical role and function. The new way of wearing the stole at the Eucharist symbolizing the 'yoke' of

Christ that the priest wears – of representing Him at the table of standing in that special place where God and his people meet most profoundly, declaring his absolution and giving his blessing. I have found an ease in assuming these new functions and the only way of describing it is to say that it has felt the most natural thing in the world for me. Presiding at my first Communion was wonderful and felt like it was always what I was meant to do. Over the last few months, as I've presided more and more, I have relaxed into things and have begun 'praying through the Eucharist' in an aim to discover personally what in the words of Michael Ramsey 'being drawn terribly and most wonderfully near to the redemptive act itself' might mean. Seeing people come to the rail and receive communion – at my hands – has been a humbling experience and that yes, God is using my ministry to touch others – not by making me something that I'm not, but by affirming everything I am.

Richard, my training vicar, wrote a brief letter to me prior to my ordination. In it he said; "Being a priest isn't just about doing priestly things but about being a priest, it's about a priestly spirit and a priestly heart'.

Not just doing priestly things but being a priest

I remember during my selection process having this image of priesthood, which is in a sense similar to being a monk or nun in that priesthood isn't something one 'knocks off' from or only does at certain times. It is about a whole way of life, about being set apart, of holiness (not piety) and of a sacred responsibility as we Endeavour to bring people into a deeper encounter with God. For me in my Church/liturgical role, I reflect on the fact, whether I like it or not, that I am different. Whilst in terms of the congregation, I am established now and have some positive relationships developing; I am increasingly aware that I am still their priest and along with this comes a certain element of detachment. Along with this I continue to wear clericals all the time. I find that this helps me to minister, not for identification purposes, but that in the 'covering' of the clerical garb, I'm then free to minister as the priest and not simply as Craig.

I am being to take and claim the authority of priesthood as given to me and this is showing itself in the confidence I am growing in speaking out, in my personal encounters with people, in giving counsel and spiritual advice. I am finding that people are increasingly coming to me now and yes; they listen to what I am saying!!

In the local community it is not quite so easy to describe the differences priesthood has/is making to my ministry.

Perhaps I need to go back to the ordination preface; 'Priests are to search for God's children in the wilderness of the world temptations. To preach the word in season, and out of season, and to declare the mighty acts of God'. There is it seems to me an authority given to me again here which is about declaring/proclaiming God's message to the community. It's an evangelistic authority to make Christ known. Last summer I had the privilege of leading a small group of people from church in some outdoor work in Abbey Fields on a hot sunny Sunday afternoon. I would like to do more next year. But this for me was engaging in something I have been given the authority as a priest to do. Now of course I could have done this last year as a Deacon and indeed did so on numerous occasions as a Church Army evangelist but as a priest I now engage in this ministry it seems in a different role and from a different place. It is a representative role that as a priest I now exercise (representing

Christ). Therefore I no longer simply proclaim the gospel message as the evangelist, I now proclaim it as Christ's representative, which feels quite different.

I am constantly fascinated in the way people in the local community seem to regard you when you wear a piece of plastic around your neck. In Kenilworth, by and large, people are positive; they will always talk and are pleasant. People will often stop and chat. I love talking with ordinary people on the street. Being the priest for me in this context is again about being accessible, listening to people and through simple conversation, enabling an encounter with God. I have found my confidence has grown considerably this last year as I've walked around the parish, done everyday things and been around people. Talking about God and spiritual things hasn't been difficult. I guess having the collar on help in that people almost expect you to talk about religious things (!!) but for me this last year doing this as felt right and something that God has confirmed and grown in me over the months.

And what about being the priest at home? Well, I guess you'd have to talk with Su and the kids about this?! Su certainly comments on the fact that since ordination I am more measured, calmer and relaxed. Not sure what this is about as I reflect on this. I certainly feel that I have settled into my new role here and am thoroughly enjoying myself. I feel for the first time in my 17 ministry that I am in the right place and I guess this shows not least of all to my family.

How do things feel one year on? I certainly feel settled and happy with where I am and what I am doing. I love it here and enjoying what I am learning, gaining experience in and the new challenges I am facing. I love presiding most of all and never want to lose the feeling of being in that most special place. What more is there to say? Father Ted sums it all up for me; 'I love being a priest'!!

Richard, my training vicar, gave me a prayer on the eve of my ordination to the priesthood that I would like to finish with - a prayer for the future:

Father, what I know not teach me,
What I have not give me,
And what I am not make me,
And all for the sake of your glory. Amen.