

## It's Not Easy

### Maundy Thursday Chrism Mass

Wakefield Cathedral - Thursday 9 April 2009

Going round the diocese, one of the most rewarding parts of my work is my time with children. I've been into countless schools over the years and the response of children is always fresh. My favourite memory was at the Ardron Memorial School at Linthwaite after opening an indoor play area. I had been asked to robe in cope and mitre and then answer questions. One tiny lad in the reception class looked at me incredulously in this ludicrous outfit. Suddenly he burst forth 'E looks like a cake.' I appeared as if had just been squeezed out of the icing 'forcing bag'!

Such incidents remind us sharply of our humanity and even of the God whom we worship. How, then, might a child see God? In a little known poem, David Scott, the Anglican parson poet who is still writing poetry reflects like this:

'It's not easy being God.  
It can't be very good for me, can it?  
To go round thinking: all this belongs to me  
that at the flick of my finger  
I could turn the whole lot out, or  
fry everyone faster than my mum does chips.

The hardest thing about being God  
is trying not to be bossy.  
To know I've got something really good going for me  
but to hold it back,  
like not pouring all the cornflakes out at once.  
Then I had this feeling the other day  
that being God was not about  
being able to kill people  
(I could do you in just by thinking about it'),  
but more of an 'I've got to do something to help *sort of power*'.  
The trouble about that is that it sometimes looks like being wet,  
feeble. Sometimes it looks like being dead.  
It's not easy being God.'

These imaginary childlike reflections strike me with a particular power in this most solemn of weeks – and, indeed, for all priests, bishops and deacons on this most solemn of days. Scott says: 'It's more like: I've got to do something to help *sort of power*.' But then moments later: 'Sometimes it looks like being dead.'

There's no doubt that that is the God in whom we believe and whom we worship. It's also the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the pattern of whose life we are called to follow. It is, of course, a vocation fraught with difficulties. How do we know if we've achieved or given anything? Delayed gratification is difficult enough, but in our case it may even be eschatological gratification. In other words we shall not know what we have achieved until all is gathered together in God and by God.

This is one of the hardest elements of our vocation. 'It's not easy being God.' But it's not that easy being a priest or a deacon either. In a world measured by enterprise, wealth creation and success we need some sense of worth. Sometimes it is like that line in the poem: 'doing something to help' – only somehow pressed to the extreme. In a wonderful reflection on ministry, Helen Oppenheimer reflects:

'We were put into the world to do good to others; but what were the others put here for?'

That was apparently the reflection of a social worker – someone who had a quite a high view of their own vocation and their own actions but who struggled to value people for their own sake. Helen points out that the more the glory of finding satisfaction in loving and doing good is preached, the easier it is to forget what value other people have *in themselves*. The short story writer, Saki, pointed out bitterly that you can always tell the victims of someone’s zealous desire to do good by their hunted expression. So Helen finishes:

‘...[E]ven though we are far from having overcome the guilty unscrupulousness of the people who are determined to do *evil* and the inertia of the people who *do not care what they do*....[i]t is still worth being on the alert for the *innocent unscrupulousness* of the people who are determined to *do good*.’

What she means is, I think, that some people can be so fixed on their own actions, even their own good intentions, that they become fixated on themselves. Rather than attending to the real needs of others they become self-oriented, almost selfish. These are difficult words for us, for whom doing good surely lies at the heart?

Our ordination vows make it abundantly clear what *is* expected of us – as deacons: ‘to be agents of God’s purposes of love, to search out the poor and weak, the sick and lonely, those who are oppressed and powerless, the forgotten corners of the world’ or priests, ‘to support the weak, defend the poor, minister to the sick and prepare the dying for their death.’ This was the charge given to us. How can we avoid being ‘do-gooders’ and avoid having the ‘innocent unscrupulousness’ of those determined to do good?

The beginnings of an answer lie in that most terrifying line of that poem about God: ‘Sometimes it looks like being dead.’ That is precisely where we are in these days. But what can it mean for us? In Jesus’ self-offering we may begin to see just a hint. ‘It is not easy being God’. For Jesus did good in a manner which demonstrates supreme goodness or indeed *Godness*. It is a doing good born of self-offering, of selflessness.

It is not, then, about seeking our own satisfaction as such – although I hope we do find our work fulfilling – but it is about giving of ourselves, even when that is a costly task. It is a doing good, born of letting our *selves* go. It is a doing good born of an ultimate handing over. That is what both betrayal and tradition mean – it is all the same word in the New Testament. Remember too that first reading: ‘...we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs *to God* and *not* to us.’

That is one of the distinctive marks of the Christian vocation, whether we are ordained or not. When we attempt to find satisfaction in our own efforts alone then we are called to repentance. But this leaves us free to delight in the free and gracious action of God. God works with us and through us to accomplish his *truly* good works in the world. That delight may come at some cost to us, but that is the Gospel of the passion and resurrection.

Many years ago now I saw David Hare’s play *Racing Demon*. It focuses on a team ministry in South London in the 1960s. Each of the ministers is flawed. Each seems incomplete. The team rector seems *wet*, just the sort of person I would avoid when I was training. But now it felt very different. Despite the non-belief of the playwright, Hare offers (perhaps unknowingly) a cast of characters who live something of that life to which we are all called. It is a most amazing calling. It is a most amazing privilege. It is often a most demanding and exhausting calling. It’s tougher now perhaps than ever in living memory. It’s not easy being a priest, a deacon – or even a bishop. But then we should not be surprised but rather heartened, for remember at the depth of it all: ‘It’s not easy being God.’

Amen.

Readings:  
II Corinthians 3.17-4.12  
Luke 22.24-40