



## CATHEDRAL *of the* INCARNATION

*Sermon at the Ordination of Adam Bucko and Anthony Jones to the Sacred Order of Priests*

Feast of the Holy Cross, September 14, 2019

The Very Rev. Dr. Michael Sniffen, Dean

So--here we all are, together. The liturgy is underway, which means that Adam and Anthony are in the final hour of their ordination process to the Sacred Order of Priests in Christ's holy catholic church (*whew*). So today is an ending and a beginning. Today is also the Feast of the Holy Cross **and** last night was a full moon on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>... (Bishop, are you sure you don't want to ordain them to the Order of the Phoenix? We could use a few more soldiers in the battle against the evils of the Ministry of Magic!)

Priestly ordination is rich in ceremony and spirit, in celebration and love, in mystery and meaning. And when done well, there is a bit of humor, danger, foreboding and adventure thrown in.

"Now is the judgment of this world," says Jesus. "Now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." **It is in the name and in the sign of the one who said this that you - Adam and Anthony - will exercise a new ministry from today.** If that doesn't terrify and excite you, run for the hills now and you may escape God's call! No. You have been chosen for this.

I am full of joy today simply to be present at the priestly ordination of two beautiful human beings I have come to know and love. Adam, the newest member of the community of cathedral clergy, and Anthony, one of my first students at the Mercer School of Theology. Both so unique in their spiritual gifts and yet they share a warmth, humility, wisdom, compassion and genuine openness to the lure of God in their lives. It seems fitting they should be ordained together – following the full moon on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>. You see I slipped that in again for anyone who brought crystals to the ordination.

I must admit that I am sheepish to say much of anything about the ministry of priesthood in the presence of the bishop as Ordinary and in this gathering of so many faithful stewards of

Christian ministry. I don't want to embarrass myself and I don't want to scandalize anyone. Well, I don't want to embarrass myself.

As Peter Gomes so rightly said some years ago, "It **may be** scandalous if we actually try to apply [the gospel] in our communities...to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, love our neighbors...[these] are dangerous things." Priests are called along with the priesthood of all believers to do this dangerous and scandalous work, always. But this will not be your primary work from today. A priest is not simply a full-time professional Christian. You are called to something much smaller now: a life of sacramental service within and beyond the community of the church in Christ's name.

You are called to a narrowing of your ministry as a Christian today that will, by God's grace, bring you lower and lower, deeper and deeper, following the mystery of God into the margins of existence – into the territory of the lost, the excluded, the unwanted and the dying – the inheritors of the promise of the kingdom. You will do this until you give up or die. And that's the Good News. That is the priestly call and the journey to which we aspire, if we aspire to anything at all. I don't mean this in a macabre Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> kind of way. I mean it in a Holy Cross joyful obedience kind of way. The last will be first, you know, so don't rush to the front. God always turns the line around just like any good kindergarten teacher.

Priesthood is not a ministry of success but one of diminishing returns; it is not a job, but a life. You will be a priest with or without a job. Your priestly life, I pray, will be a scandalous one – it must be if you are to remain close to Jesus.

It will be especially scandalous for you to fully inhabit your priestly vocation in the institutional church and in the west. In an age of panic over declining numbers and jobs, there is enormous pressure to 'save the church' through growth strategies and attempts to make institutional religion relevant again. In this regard, I hope you will announce early and often that you have nothing to offer this project. I am with my colleague, Martyn Percy, the Dean of Christ Church Oxford on this: Jesus didn't spend a lot of time talking about success – and it will take a lot more than mission-minded management theory to save the institutional church. Don't get caught up in it!

You are called not to any scheme or project or plan, but to a faithful life of self-emptying, following the example of Christ, until you are fully spent and like a candle, go out. If you do this faithfully, many will seek to extinguish you before your time. This is the privilege and the burden of your vowed responsibility and duty as a priest. It is an overwhelming gift which will transform you and those around you.

The priest who has most helped me explore this mystery recently in plain language is Sam Wells at St. Martin in the Field's, London. In his 2015 book, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, he describes what he calls a theology of *being with* - an argument that at the heart of the Christian faith is God's commitment to *be with*, revealed most clearly in Jesus Christ. Wells argues that while Jesus spent a week in Jerusalem *working for* us, and three years in and around Galilee *working with* us, he spent 30 years in Nazareth simply *being with* us. From this observation he offers that *being with* is the heart of the gospel and of the Christian life. It is a wonderful offering to all Christians, and especially to priests. Adam and Anthony, you will now have a place in the zeitgeist which can be exploited for good. You are called to *be with* people in ways that connect them and you, sacramentally, to the cosmic reality of God *with us*. It goes far deeper than magic mass fingers or the Exorcism of Emily Rose. Your presence as priests, ritually, pastorally, publicly and privately participates in the presence of Christ in a way that is uniquely narrower than other forms of Christian ministry. You are to *be with* God and the created order in ways that honor the sacred nature of all reality.

Many of us priests habitually position ourselves in a *working for* direction. It has been a significant failure of the professionalization of the priesthood over many generations. I am inviting you to eschew it – and to see yourself not as a professional working for and with others, but as a scandalous, nearly valueless outlier - focused primarily on *being with* others – a spiritual teacher, a presider, a confessor, a pastor -who is of no worth or value to the powers and principalities of the world. That is where you will find your freedom in Christ and that is where your people will experience God's power in you to absolve and to reconcile.

A focus on *being with* will allow you to be the priest the world needs. This will demand lots of time, especially in prayer and lots of trust, especially in God.

Of course, you will work with people and occasionally work for people, but that will no longer be your primary identity with regard to ministry. Your life as a priest will first be a life focused on *being with*.

There will be enormous pressure for you to inhabit a whole range of roles, just look at us up here in all our resplendent regalia and titles that go on for days. I am here today to remind you and myself and our brothers and sisters in holy orders that we are gifted and bound to a primary ministry of *being with*. That is what God and God's people require of us first and foremost.

A wonderful example of this struck me in the movie *Bohemian Rhapsody*, a biopic about the band Queen and lead singer Freddy Mercury. When Freddy is really struggling with his identity, his celebrity and his loneliness – his dark night of the soul -he calls his agent, Paul, and says, "Paul, sweetheart, I want to throw a party."

“Who do you want to invite?” asks Paul.

“People! I want you to shake the freak tree and invite anyone who plops to the ground. Dwarves and giants, magicians, Zulu tribesmen, contortionists, fire eaters, and priests...we’re going to need to confess.”

As a priest, we attend to anyone at the party equally. We are there to celebrate the humanity of the guests and to *be with* them. This may be clearest to you and to others in your role as confessor, or presider at the eucharist, but your ministry of *being with* is more expansive than the discrete sacraments of the church - it is bigger even than the church itself. Why? Because God is bigger than the church.

In your life as a priest, you will find yourself in many unexpected places. Scandalous places. Be present, be present – don’t run and hide - and the moment may be sacralized in ways beyond your comprehension. It is for this that the priesthood exists at all – to point to the sacred in everything and everyone, and when it is right, to pray God’s blessing.

All Christians here are members of the priesthood of all believers and called to fulfill our baptismal vows. All humans here, are bound by our common humanity to respect the dignity of all and to care for this fragile earth, our island home. But now, Adam and Anthony, you take on additional vows which focus your ministry as priests in Christ’s church. May these vows be a gift to you. May they bring you the freedom of Christ more fully. May they be an opportunity for you to fully embrace yourself and those God has called to *be with*.

Soon and very soon, you will be priests.

What kind of priests you will be is a matter of great importance to the whole Church. I, for one, hope that you will do nothing more and nothing less than commit yourself fully to *being with* the Church and the world in ways that transform both more deeply into the kingdom of God.

As you turn now to *be with* those you have been chosen to serve - May God *be with* you in the full moon, the new moon, and the total eclipse of the sun.