

Sermon preached by Fr Andrew Nunn, Rector General of SCP at the final conference Eucharist at the Parish Church of St George, Jesmond, Newcastle upon Tyne, Thursday, 9 July 2009.

I wonder who your favourite comedy vicar is? I can just remember 'All Gas and Gaiters' being on the tele with Derek Nimmo playing the Revd Mervyn Noote, the bumbling, accident prone Chaplain to the bishop. Nice but dim comes to mind! Or maybe it's the vicar in 'Dad's Army', Frank Williams portrayal of the Revd Timothy Farthing, pompous, ineffectual with an over attentive verger always in tow? Or what about the more attractive vicar, Michael, in 'Keeping up Appearances', living in fear of his parishioner? Or maybe you're a 'Father Ted' fan – Father Ted, Father Dougal and Father Jack – frustrated, mad and drunk? Or maybe after all, your favourite is Dawn French playing The Revd Geraldine Grainger in 'The Vicar of Dibley'.

I think there's a PhD waiting to be written on the portrayal of priests on television. Maybe someone's got the funding to do it already – but if they haven't, go for it. And of course it's not just in the sitcoms they appear – the soaps have had their fair share of the mad, the bad and the incompetent, as well as the odd nice person, to fill the dog collar from time to time and hatch, match and dispatch the characters.

It's always seemed to me that the arrival of Geraldine Grainger in Dibley was good news for us all. In most of the other situations where we stumble over vicars in comedies they're the mad buck-toothed person, the eccentric, slow witted and naive inhabiting a world that's completely left them behind. The new Vicar of Dibley in contrast was the only sane person in a village that seemed more like an open psychiatric ward.

Whatever the popular perception of us might be it's priesthood that binds us together – that and claiming a catholic identity within the church to which we belong and in which we serve. Priesthood is what unites us within this Society and it's that priesthood that we celebrate in this mass.

As you know I celebrated 25 years as a priest last week – not that long a time I realise compared with some of you here – but sufficient a mile stone I thought to pause and to give thanks and invite friends to come and share with me in 'a bit of a do'. And pausing and thinking made me concentrate for just a while on the priesthood in which we share.

I find it very difficult to imagine what I'd be doing if I were not a priest – being a priest is in both a good way and a bad way – as you well know – all absorbing. I have the privilege – and I do mean that – of being a Bishop's Adviser and so serve on a Panel each year meeting and talking to those who're at that final stage of testing their vocation to ministry before beginning training. They've a variety of ideas about priesthood and what it's all about – but the thing I think that none of them or us can ever get our heads around is what the sacrificial nature of our ministry will be.

Perhaps the unsurprising truth is that the reality of the sacrifice only becomes clear as we spend longer and longer in the priesthood and realise that we're lost and found within its nature – that to use the words of St John the Baptist – 'I must grow less that he might become greater' and that that is precisely what has happened to us – that at one and the same time I've become more me and less me.

That sense of total offering of self to God is what we're about as priests. That's the sacrifice that's the personal offering that you and I have made – and people must look at us and think we're mad – and maybe we are or just madly in love with the God who's madly in love with us.

To be honest there have been times when the reality of that offering has almost become too much – there are more times though when the reality of that offering has been life giving, life enhancing and when I've been unable to say anything else but thank you to God for calling me to share in this most amazing ministry.

I'm a great fan of the poetry of R S Thomas, that most unusual of priests, but for me, honest, brave in his unknowing, his doubting. In one of his poems 'Mediations' he writes these lines of God speaking to us:

I am the bush burning
at the centre of
your existence; you must put
your knowledge off and come
to me with your mind
bare.

A month ago I was standing beneath the burning bush in St Catherine's Monastery in Sinai. What a sacred place that is – the place of extreme, divine encounter. I took my shoes off for that land is holy – but Thomas suggests something more significant when we respond to the fire of God's love calling to us – not just your shoes – empty yourself, come to me bare, naked, empty. But dare we do it – it takes a lot of guts to approach the flames, bare footed and empty handed but as we know that's what God called us to do and you were prepared to do it, and you are prepared to do it, day in day out. We come with all our inadequacies, all our ridiculousness holding out empty hands to the God who places bread and wine in them so that we have something with which to feed the people who come to us – for we have nothing else to give, only what God gives us to give.

No wonder people want to laugh at us, no wonder people cannot understand us.

And then we look at Jesus standing before Pilate, a laughable king, an object of ridicule, abandoned, alone, for the most part silent before his accusers, and we know that this is the king that we seek to serve, that we're prepared to give our life to, this is the king whose presence we want to make real to the people that we've been called to serve, this is the eternal God who we adore – God enthroned in heaven and on the altar.

We've been walking on holy ground these days whilst we've been up here in the north-east, walking where saints have trod. Their knowledge of God and their commitment to God is what made this place holy. It was their faithfulness to the call which they received, their counter-cultural, often shocking way of living out the Gospel, their all or nothing approach to God, that brought others to know the one who calls us to follow him.

As priests we have the responsibility, the privilege of bringing people into the presence of the holy today, of creating sacred places and sacred people for our own time, through the grace of God, wherever it is that we're serving. We have to live lives that reflect not ourselves but the God whose priests we are.

Bishop Jack Nicholls was preaching for me last week and he said that priests are there to do three things – three things that really create the sacred in the world in which we live. We're to bless whatever needs blessing; we're to forgive whatever needs forgiving; we're to feed whatever needs feeding. It's as simple and as profound as that – and it's a lifetimes work that we've been given to do – priests of the king, priests of the kingdom, serving the one seated on the throne – drawing people into that closer presence of God, leading them to the fire of God's love, making the ordinary sacred.

And the feeders need to be fed and the forgivers need to be forgiven and the blessers need to be blessed – and in this Mass God does all this for us – and in the bread and in the wine he'll give himself completely to you who've given yourself completely to him, a divine exchange with the one who is the centre of our existence, the holy fire that burns at the heart of each one of us.

[ENDS]