

**Sermon preached by Rt Revd Ian Cundy, Bishop of Peterborough
at the service for the Renewal of Vows and Blessing of Oils at
Peterborough Cathedral, Maundy Thursday, 20th March 2008**

Text: Revelation 1.6

He made us to be a kingdom, priests of his God and Father.

Even though the last time I used the Myers Briggs Personality Type Indicator I emerged as INFJ, which was confusing as the first time I was ENTP! I am not much given to introspection. But inevitably the last few months have given me more time to ‘be’, to read, think and pray.

As we have contemplated what it means to be a diocese inspired by God’s passion, building communities which are ‘**releasing ministry**’ it could have been a frustrating experience not to be able to play a full part in that process, and to have one’s own vocation apparently curtailed by the frailty of the body and the debilitating effects of chemotherapy. I say ‘apparently’ because it had reminded me that ministry – which post John Collins we must understand to be about ‘ambassadorship’ as much as ‘service’ – is concerned with the dignity of being as well as the frenzy of spirit-filled activity.

What does it mean to be a bishop when others must take the lead, have the oversight and relieve me of those responsibilities for which I do not have the energy?

Last weekend I re-read the book that 25 years ago had a profound effect on my thinking about theology and ministry. Although I have not read it frequently during those years its thesis has remained imprinted on my mind. The author, Canon Bill Vanstone, begins by considering the almost universal use in the gospels and in Paul of the Greek word *paradosis* – handing over – for the act of Judas betrayal and the change in Jesus circumstances from that moment. Why do they use that word rather than *prodosis*, which carries the normal connotation of the English word, *betray*? Up to that point in Jesus’ life he has been the active initiator, now his fate is decided by others. Both the archetypal gospels, Mark and John, make it clear in different ways that now his

ministry is passive – others take the initiative – and that in that change the full significance of his ‘passion’ is to be understood.

Vanstone asks us to consider that linguistic and theological fact alongside the increasing sense in the modern world that we are the victims, not the creative activists, subject to forces and circumstances beyond our control, and that we become the object rather than the subject of what is happening in the world. In that we become ‘diminished in human stature, deprived of human dignity’.

But further reflection on the ‘handing over’ of Jesus would challenge that assumption. For John, Jesus’ ‘glory’ was fully revealed in his passion when he was the patient, the object of others’ decisions. We are confronted with the paradox that God who is impassible, reveals himself by being passible – allowing others to decide Jesus’ fate: will they follow the crowd on Palm Sunday and become his disciples, or respond to his challenge by putting him to death? That in turn challenges our own understanding of human personality. For far from being diminished by being the patient, the object of others’ choice, we become as Jesus did ‘figures of unique and almost unbelievable dignity’. It is in waiting that we acquire our full stature – the thought that gave the book its title, *the Stature of Waiting*.

We are familiar with the thought that priesthood, our priesthood as well as that of Christ, is about being as much as doing; receiving as well as giving. But if you are an activist like me, actually to be a patient – to be handed over to others for them to determine your treatment – is a salutary experience. It reminds me of my vulnerability, of that side of my humanity which is not about achievement, but about receiving the ministry of others.

Our society reveres strong and dynamic leadership; so to assert the dignity of the patient is inevitably counter-cultural. Human dignity is also about acknowledging – indeed celebrating – one’s **vulnerability**; about receiving the ministry of the world around us as the truth of the Easter story is worked out in the re-birth of the natural world; and about receiving the ministry of one’s colleagues, for whose kindness and untiring work (particularly Bishop Frank’s) I am deeply grateful.

The ‘glory’ of God is revealed this week in the human Christ, the object of others’ decisions and passive acceptance of death. He never despised nor rejected his humanity, neither should we. Ministry delights in the world, rejoices that we are human, made in the image of God, whether we stride the fells of human endeavour, or wait on the decisions and the ministrations of others.

So over the last few months Canon Vanstone has been my constant companion. So has a phrase uttered by a life-long friend with whom I shared my diagnosis several months ago. ‘Make friends’, she said, ‘with your mortality’.

Make friends with your mortality. We all know we are mortal – destined to spend a relatively short time in this world; limited in what we can achieve while we are in our present post; curtailed as well as enriched by our humanity – but, whether we have experienced an Ignatian retreat or not, we all have to come to terms with – to befriend – it!

But what does that mean? My own reflection has made me more aware of **the affection I have for the world**, and the passionate desire to see it reflect more fully the glory and the standards of its Creator. We live amidst incredible beauty – natural as well as human – there is beautiful scenery and there are beautiful cities and communities. We are not here to exploit it, but to act as God’s stewards handing it on to the next generation in at least as good condition as we received it – a truth which our contemporaries seem at last to be taking to heart as we take seriously the effects of global warming, and the importance of the built environment for human flourishing.

One of the delights of travelling the diocese in recent years has been the re-emergence of the Red Kite. I rarely fail to spot one during the week – especially on the way to Corby!!

The red kite feeds on carrion, clearing up the mess of our destruction as we leave carcasses behind on our roads, or the remnants of other hunter’s meals in the animal kingdom. That such majestic and beautiful birds should be the ‘dustmen’ of the ornithological world perhaps gives us pause for thought about the value we invest in those whose menial and poorly rewarded tasks maintains the frailty of human living! and clears up our streets and verges – our ‘mess’.

Secondly, to make friends of our mortality, gives me **an awareness of my limitations** – a sobering yet heartening thought. I cannot possibly make the world a better place, or achieve all that I might like to, on my own. I must work with others as part of a team, both **in** time, and **through** time. Hopefully I can stand on the shoulders of others (as well as inevitably on their toes) and join hands with my colleagues in building the Kingdom of God. The temptation to omni-competence remains strong! but partnership shares the burden and both enlightens and lightens the task. ‘Receive the cure of souls, which is both yours and mine’ are not empty words; they express a deep and abiding attitude which should pervade our relationship, and your relationships with others – ordained and lay. We walk together, we work together, as you transcend my limitations and I by God’s grace may occasionally transcend yours.

Jesus, as he was handed over, entrusted the task to Peter, who denied him, to his colleagues who fled and then to a broken woman who stood weeping at his tomb!

And thirdly, it gives me what I might call the sense of **the particularity of my vocation**.

Watching my former chauffeur, Guy Scott, face the difficult challenge of becoming the Chaplain to the Scilly Isles – ‘An Island Parish’ on BBC2 for the un-initiated – I was amused and heartened to hear Bishop Bill Ind admit that he could not be the parish priest of the islands. It is not his vocation! But he can use his influence and contacts with Tim Smit, the creator of Helligan and of the Eden Project, and others to help them achieve a dream of a re-built secondary school, with a speciality in environmental studies.

My mortality – the boundedness of my life – hopefully gives me the energy and the inclination to fulfil my God-given vocation and ambitions, but not to trespass into yours, except to encourage you to fulfil them. And that is something we can live with, work with and truly befriend. That friendship does not guarantee an easy passage, but it does give me a sense of fulfilment and a deep gratitude for all that has enriched my life.

I hope the fact that this vocation is God-given, not self-made, enables me to face a new and different phase with a sense of contentment, as well as the inevitable bouts of frustration – I have

to celebrate my humanity, after all! But in the end ‘All will be well and all manner of things will be well’.

There must be a footnote to what I have said – indeed it is more than a footnote; it is the foundation. To find human dignity in being the object, the patient; and to befriend one’s mortality can only be possible for me in a deep and transforming faith in the reality of God; the experience of resurrection and the spiritual and supportive community of the Church.

Today and tomorrow we focus our minds on Jesus of Nazareth, passive and vulnerable, handed over to death, revealing in his acceptance, God’s true nature as ‘impassible, yet passive’ (*Deus non passibilis sed passus* as Vanstone expresses it) and we are invited to release our ministry after that pattern. But on Sunday we will celebrate the ‘raised’ Christ – again the object of other’s, in this case God’s, decision – for the universal testimony of the New Testament is that ‘God raised him from the dead’.

Only in that perspective can I find myself lifted out of introspection, into a greater reality that I cannot fully understand, but which has under-girded my life and my ministry. Only in that perspective can I dare, with you, to claim a priestly vocation:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come . . . and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests of [serving NRSV] his God and Father, to him be the glory and dominion for ever and ever.

Amen