

St Paul's Cathedral - Ordination of the Deacons 2010.

Sermon by the Bishop of London, the Rt Revd Richard Chartres

Speak Lord for your servant is listening.

Did you see the first episode of Rev last week? Tom Hollander fresh from the Pirates of the Caribbean plays an inner city Vicar. His church is actually St Leonard's Shoreditch and the cast list which is supposed to be inspired by London clergy includes a splendidly beastly Archdeacon – which is of course where drama and reality part company.

Tom Hollander in an interview with the Scotsman says, "Stories about Vicars are always being told because they are at the heart of our society. Vicars touch all parts of the community and see life in all its extremity."

Well today we have 41 wonderfully diverse examples of the real thing not actors. We honour them for responding, like the young Samuel, to the call of God to serve him at a time like this when –"The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread."

It is a time when we might take up the horrified lament of the prophet Hosea: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge". Instead of the knowledge of God we have an illusion that the world is a boundless theatre of human desire and willing. This has led to the present global turbulence. The project of "growth without limit with no end in view beyond the process itself" has scarred the earth and we have forgotten that the economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment. We have been living with illusions and the consequences are serious.

To reject God, once all the oxygen generated by the Christian centuries in our country has been used up, leads in time to a collapse of personal and social righteousness; to a disabling reticence about what is to be regarded as good and true and beautiful.

A society like any living organism depends for health and vitality on the proper integration of parts into the whole. If society is organised around ignorance and illusion then the moral quality of citizens declines and disintegration follows.

Christianity is tolerated if it is presented as a harmless lifestyle choice like vegetarianism but beloved deacons, you are being called in our time to a much more demanding and even perilous life of service in which you will strive to read the signs of the times with the compassion that comes from keeping company with the Jesus Christ who wept over Jerusalem. Then using your best talents of love, intellect and imagination you are called to teach the knowledge of the living God – it is he that hath made us and not we ourselves. You are to teach with the humility that comes from the constant prayer that dispels illusions and by turning day by day to contemplate the Lord Jesus Christ and obey his command that we should love and serve him in one another.

Graham Tomlin, the Dean of St Mellitus College recently sent me the results of some fascinating research. Londoners were asked whether they were concerned to introduce other citizens to their world view and convert them to it. The largest group who professed such a concern were Christians. The third largest group intent on conversions were Muslims. They were in third place because of their relative size as a proportion of the whole population of Greater London. In second place as actively concerned to convert others to their world view were atheists and agnostics; those who deny the existence of God or believe that nothing can be known about ultimate reality.

You are called to godly, clear eyed ambition; Christ centred but outward facing to a turbulent world much of which lives in the illusion that human beings have outgrown God; a world in which human beings have instead made gods of their own wills. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.

As part of your ministry to promote reconciliation of the whole human race with God and with one another you will work for the unity of the one church of which we say that we are a part. "The Church of England is part of the One Holy catholic and Apostolic Church." There is only one body of the Lord Jesus and there can only be one church.

Child development theory recognizes three stages in the evolution of play. There is solitary play; then parallel play and finally co-operative play. The pre-ecumenical stage was solitary denominational play. We have passed through the stage of parallel play expressed in bureaucratic church unity schemes; now we are being prepared I believe for more co-operative play and you will be leaders in this period.

A firm foundation with attention to God's horizon can relieve us of so many of burdens of defending entrenched positions taken up in the broils of the 16th century. It remains true as St Augustine said that our Christian life should be characterized by three affirmations – in fundamentals - unity; in disputable matters - freedom but in everything - love.

Be Christ centred; centred on his sacrifice on the cross but look to the horizon on the third day and you will discover many surprising allies and the unity that Christ has already given to us.

Also remember that you are being called in the mature stage of spiritual development to "co-operative play" in which you are charged to work with fellow ministers and with the bishop as knots in a net which binds the whole church as a living organism together.

Together we are to re-member Jesus Christ in the present. We are not merely to recall what he said and did but to re-member him in our life together as opposed to dismembering him. We are to constitute his body in 21st century London in order that we may together serve God's mission in the world with more joy and effectiveness.

Jesus Christ calls us not to a new religion but to a new life for the sake of the lost and the suffering. He says to us "Truly I tell you that just as you reached out to one of the least of these who are members of my family you embraced me."

This is in some ways a hard call. Sir Ernest Shackleton, the explorer is said to have put this advertisement into the newspaper – "Wanted for Hazardous Journey, small wages bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful; honour and recognition in case of success." 5,000 people are said to have responded. You have also responded; you have presented your bodies as a living sacrifice but thank God you are journeying in company with Jesus Christ who renews us by his spirit; inspires us with his love and unites in his body – Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.