

DIVINE RUBBISH

Ordination Charge, Kensington Area

St Cuthman's House

Sussex

Thursday June 14th 2015

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‘All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation...So we are ambassadors for Christ.’ (II Corinthians. 18, 20). John Beaumont was a remarkable person by any standards, Called up, as a young man, in the Second World War, he was taken prisoner, escaped and then was later captured again to live out the rest of Hitler's war in Colditz, from which captivity he never escaped. He made escape from his first imprisonment done up as a bundle of rubbish; Angela, his wife, said that he'd never given up that disguise since his escape from captivity.

John was born into a well-to-do family and received a good education. Indeed he was an accomplished man – well-read and no mean musician! On being demobbed the world was effectively his oyster. He had all the credentials for entering public life and could have made his way too in business. In the end, however, he decided to offer himself for ordination. He did so with great humility and with no desire for fame or personal ambition. His ambition was there – but entirely for the gospel of Christ Jesus. He served early on in his ministry, in some very tough areas.

I only got to know him in his final cure, that of a group of country parishes, in the beautiful Meon Valley, in south west Hampshire between Southampton and Portsmouth. It was fairly early on in the days of country groupings, but it was one of the larger clusters of the Diocese of Portsmouth. Meonstoke, Droxford, Corhampton and Exton are villages varying in size but each with sufficient population to make them real places. In the past each would have had its own parish priest and they'd have still had plenty to do even then.

John and Angela both recognised this and they set to work to make sure that each village felt that it had its own rector and distinct church community. How would they seek to achieve this? Well, first of all through prayer. John would say the morning and evening service in each of the churches in turn. However, every morning and early evening he would make his way by bicycle from Droxford vicarage around all four villages – Droxford was the largest of the villages. Then, he would toll the bell for a few minutes in each church and finally in the last church of that morning or afternoon tour, he would say the morning or evening office. John's quiet assurance of God in Jesus Christ was the foundation of all.

So too, he and Angela would entertain in each village – fêtes, harvest suppers, teas, Christian fairs; you name it and it would happen. John came from the more Catholic tradition in the Church of England, but he never allowed his own agenda to dominate. Largely it was country religion. Depending on what the local folk had been used to, so he would adapt his approach. In some parishes the ceremony was more elaborate; elsewhere it was plain fare, but always rich in John's preaching and profound in his prayer. They were indeed fortunate parishes.

Where did all this come from? Well, I suppose the simplest answer is from the humanity that God had given him. It came from his own being infused with the grace of God in Jesus. In a way, of course, that is the essence of the *Incarnation*. As God has come among us in Jesus – and as he is still among us and will remain with us until eternity – so through the Incarnation, God crowns our humanity. What greater sense of confidence in God's created humanity could there be than coming among us as one of us? That, alongside his giving his life for us is the essence of *the good news*. It is the essence too of our priesthood. None of this

is *our* doing – it is all a gift, or if you like, to use that remarkable and essential theological concept, *grace*.

John Beaumont captured this in the story of a priest friend who had been a great influence after the war in bringing John to offer himself for ordination. This priest had been a military chaplain in Palestine and the Middle East, during Hitler's War. His base was at the command headquarters in Jerusalem, but his remit extended as far as Cairo, Port Said and Alexandria. On one occasion, in pursuit of his ministry in Egypt he had to be away from Jerusalem for a week or so. He briefed the C.O. there, who was a good church man. Everything's in order, he said, no special events. I'm sure you and the chapel orderlies can sort out the Sunday services.

On his return, the C.O. had a surprise for the chaplain: 'The day after you'd gone the bishop telegraphed to say that he was coming two days later to confirm.' 'But we had no candidates', said the chaplain, '...presumably the bishop didn't come?' 'Oh, yes', said the C.O., 'I felt I couldn't put him off. I simply detailed six men to be confirmed and when the bishop came it was all done.'

The chaplain was both flabbergasted and appalled: 'You've made a nonsense of all my ministry here and you've made a nonsense too of confirmation and the training which I always arrange. These men knew nothing. They simply came to church each week. How could anyone know whether they had any real calling to confirmation?' There was a stand-off and nothing more was said.

However, the said chaplain, despite this display of ire, was also a man of some humility. For, some fifteen years later, he'd received a note from one of the men who'd been detailed for confirmation. The man wrote: 'I thought you'd want to know, sir, that at Petertide I shall be ordained to priesthood. I was one of those men detailed for confirmation in Jerusalem.'

The chaplain wrote back to this ordinand: 'Thank you so much for letting me know. I shall, of course, pray for you on the day of your ordination and before. You may be interested to know that you are the fourth of those people who were detailed for confirmation to be ordained.' The chaplain's humility lay, of course, in admitting this, after his fierce reaction at the time.

What does this say then? It says that that which underpins our priesthood is not our own efforts, nor signing up to a set of rules or even doctrines, and certainly not assuming that with the institution behind us, and our own energies, we somehow bring God, in Jesus, to people. God can do that albeit through us. As we enter these final three days, we are called, then, to once again, open our hearts to God's grace, for as the text with which I began reminds us: '*All this is from God...who has given us this ministry of reconciliation.*' So I say to you simply: Godspeed. Have a blessed ministry. *God in Jesus Christ will do it all.*

Amen.

Reading

Mark. 3. 20- end.