

“40 years on”

A sermon preached by Brian Smith, former Bishop of Edinburgh at St Michael's Church, Cornhill, on Thursday 29 September, 2016, marking the 40th anniversary of the ordination to the priesthood of Stephen Platten, Edward Cardale and Ralph Godsall, members of the same clergy cell as Colin Gough, Christopher Moody and Graham James.

It is good to be here celebrating Michaelmas together, and also celebrating the 40th anniversary of your ordination, and 40 years of your cell.

Last year I was celebrating Michaelmas, and preaching, at St Michael's Church Broadhurst, in Botswana. Colin Gough is currently in Botswana teaching at the same place as I was. He too may be, today, celebrating and preaching at that same church! So we can regard him as celebrating with us here, with the same angels and archangels.

I think back to ordinations around 1976. You will recall how in those far off days the ordinal in the Book of Common Prayer *began* with the sermon. I recall (and I have shared this memory with some of you before) one really splendid ordination sermon reminding the ordinands of their calling to be available to all sorts of people in all sorts of ways.

“When you are called out to see someone at midnight, don't say 'I wasn't ordained for this!' When you are left clearing up after all have left the vestry, don't say 'I wasn't ordained for this!' When no one turns up to assist you prepare the hall for the village concert, don't say 'I wasn't ordained for this!'”

It was a splendid sermon, and nothing detracted from its power, when we proceeded with the liturgy, and immediately had the lesson from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 6.

“It is not right that we should wait at tables....appoint someone else to do it.”

We glimpsed a church within which different attitudes could be forcefully expressed, within minutes of each other, and no one bat an eyelid. However such a relaxed attitude to difference was certainly not to characterise the next 40 years.

And today we are marking an anniversary, not just of 40 years of priestly ordination, but of 40 years of your cell. (*or is it 41years of the cell!!!*)

It is a ruby anniversary. I looked up the significance of *ruby* as meaning 40 years, and read that the ruby - symbolises *health, wealth and wisdom* as well as *passion*. It is your cell to a T.

Think back to 1976 – we can note some interesting facts about that time:

- In 1976 the church in the US approved women priests.
- In 1976 the (allegedly liberal) doctrine report of the Church of England, *Christian Believing* was published.
- In 1976 The 1975 *Worship and Doctrine Measure* became effective - focussing liturgical debate in the church.
- And it was also in 1975 that the first personal computer was marketed in the US, and from where it began to invade our own shores.

These very few months set the scene for a church that came to be dominated by heated debates on:

- the place of women in ordained ministry
- liberal theology – recall how the phrase ‘*Bishop of Durham*’ came to replace the phrase ‘*Bishop of Woolwich*’;
- liturgical revision – for and against series 1, 2, 3, ASB, Common Worship....
 - recall Alan Bennett’s remark, “*They’ve given up the old Eucharist, and are experimenting with something called Series 1 2 and 3. It doesn’t sound like religion to me. It sounds like baseball.*”
- And communication in and by the church has changed.
Who could have guessed in 1976 what “*A blogging Archbishop*” might be?

In 1976 winds of change were gathering to blow like a gale across the Church of England. They would test whether it was built on sand, or, more stably, on rock.

And so we might ask, what gives stability in life.

E M Forster reflects on this in “*Howard’s End*’

He is writing in 1910, of changes reshaping society.

There is a dialogue reflecting on the intense mobility affecting modern civilisation. It is one where people are ‘on their bike’ seeking work. Where populations move. Where international businesses move employees across the globe. Where people are torn from their roots, and have no concrete place that is their true ‘home’.

Seeking meaning in such a world will be difficult. Forster writes that in such a world.....

..... we shall receive no help from the earth. Trees and meadows and mountains will only be a spectacle, and the binding force that they once exercised on character must be entrusted to Love alone. May Love be equal to the task!”

May Love be equal to the task!"

And of the church we might to ask whether *love alone* can make it a place where meaning may be found, once its roots in *Doctrine, Liturgy, Ministry and its engagement with society* are simultaneously subject to dramatic change.

BUT 40 years on we need to look forwards as well as back.

I was struck that Michaelmas is the anniversary of the birth in 1547 of Miguel de Cervantes – author of *Don Quixote*. [This ought not to have surprised me, given that he was born in Catholic Spain, and name was Miguel!!]

One of Graham Green's novels I have always liked is *Monsignor Quixote* – a pastiche based upon the earlier and much longer work by Cervantes – *Don Quixote*.

Many of you will know the story, (set in Spain in the late 1960's). [Not least because it was recently dramatized on Woman's Hour.]

Father Quixote, an elderly dedicated parish priest in a small Spanish village is by a quirk of fate unexpectedly elevated to the rank of Monsignor – to the horror of his own bishop, (and indeed against his own wishes.) Preferment is ever thus!

As a result he has to leave his beloved parish.

At the same time, his friend, the local Communist mayor, an atheist, loses an election and is deprived of his role in the village.

The two men decide to go on a journey together in Father Quixote's very old Seat 600 car, which he calls after the earlier Don Quixote's old horse - Rosanante.

Both men have been whisked out of their "comfort zone." Father Quixote is removed from his traditional parish ministry, the mayor from his political life.

Both journey together in friendship.

They have copious wine and cheese – contemporary restrictions on the use of alcohol while driving seem to be fairly relaxed.

They follow a semi-structured path of exploration around Spain, neither being really clear where they were going. They meet with strange 'adventures'. And conversing on the journey each becomes open to the other. They share doubts and questions about religion and politics'. They explore the difference between *believing* the faith, *understanding* the faith and *accepting* the faith. One commentator noted that in a book of less than 200 pages, there are explored 132 issues of theology.

And on that journey something of faith, and something of love, grows and deepens, through their simple friendship, and their journeying together.

Father Quixote remarks to the mayor “*In your company...I think more freely than when I am alone. When I am alone I read – I hide myself in my books. In them I find the faith of better men than myself...and I tell myself that I must be wrong.*”

He confesses the questions and doubts that arise for him in his theology, and how these coexist with his faith. He remarks that “*Disbelief haunts my belief*”. But as we follow them on their journey something else is growing.

In the journey of friendship, they each speak from within their traditions, Catholic or Marxist. They question much in the old textbooks of their faith or their politics. This affects the mayor with his *Communist Manifesto* as much as Father Quixote with *Heribert Jone’s textbook of Moral Theology*.

But whatever we saw developing between them required two things’ - *friendship*, and *a journeying together over a period of time*. They are stuck together in the same small rusty Seat.

Each new appointment in ministry moves one out of a comfort zone, where one had learned to be the priest in that situation, and moves one on to something new. It can sometimes be unsettling.

Quixote knew unsettlement in becoming a monsignor and losing his parish. For the Mayor it was losing the election, Elevation on one hand, and deprivation on the other had identical effects.

In a cell such as you formed we see persons who made a commitment *to go on a journey together* over the years that were to come. We see persons who have known changes in life as each was called to move out of one “comfort zone”, and to be a priest in a new milieu. And we see friendship, existing in an ever-turbulent church.

Father Quixote and the Mayor found in their rusty Seat a place of deeper meeting and renewal. A rusty Seat is perhaps not a bad image of your clergy Cell.

In the desire to find something of meaning in the midst of turbulence and vanishing certainties, E M Forster had asked the question “*Will love be equal to the task?*”. And he asked the question with the hint that love alone, may *not* be fully equal to the task.

But there is something in your Cell life that is more than just friendship or love. It is that *commitment to stick with each other through thick and thin*, and to face together issues that life throws up on your various journeys. Such a commitment may seem a little thing when put alongside the demands of the great theological virtues of *Faith and Hope and Love*, but it makes *all the difference* to it all.

We are today celebrating ministry, but also celebrating that which has enriched that ministry within a turbulent church. And that enrichment comes through those two things - *mutual commitment and friendship*.

And it is worth recalling that Jesus himself journeyed around the countryside with his disciples, encountering many ‘adventurers’. As a result he was moved to call those with whom he journeyed not servants, *but friends*, and our joint celebration today is of priestly ministry, friendship and commitment, as seen in this cell. And for it we give thanks.

AMEN

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