

Sunday 15 June 2008
The Fourth Sunday after Trinity
Romans 5: 1-8 Matthew 9: 35 — 10: 8

Bishops recently questioned the ability of the clergy to cope. In a report produced by the Church of England's Ministry Division, bishops who took part in a survey expressed concerns about how many of their clergy were "up to the job".

The business of the stresses and strains of ordained life and the lack of clarity about the terms and conditions of serving clergy alongside the expectations of the people about what clergy should do and the perceptions of the world about what clergy actually do have exercised the minds of the House of Bishops for over ten years now. Indeed, a great deal of work has been done concerning conditions of service and levels of remuneration and issues of conduct.

My sense is that any job which involves leadership is tough and that's how it is. But I also believe that it is the leadership role which is its own reward.

Today's gospel lesson helps us in this respect because it has a great deal to say about leadership and authority.

At first reading, Jesus appears to be identifying a pastoral need with a pastoral solution: the harassed and helpless crowds in the cities and villages will benefit from the pastoral work which, a few verses later, he commissions his disciples to undertake.

And, certainly, the emphasis in the text on the healing of the physically and mentally sick leads us to suppose that the pastoral work he is commissioning is pastoral work exactly as we understand it.

However, it should come as no surprise that there is much more to this passage than that. The identification by Jesus of pastoral need and the commissioning of the disciples to respond to it are bracketed in this passage by reference to "sheep without a shepherd" and "the lost sheep of the house of Israel".

Throughout the Bible, the imagery of a shepherd is used to denote political and spiritual leadership. If you want to understand that in a directly contemporary sense, you have only to remember that the shepherd's crook which bishops carry today is a symbol not of how nice they are but — very decidedly — of their authority (which is why a bishop is not allowed to carry a crozier when he or she visits another diocese).

The pastoral need which Jesus identifies then in this morning gospel passage is a need for leadership which is why he gives the disciples "authority" and it seems to me that demoralisation amongst the clergy about which the House of Bishops is expressing concern right now partly arises over this question of leadership and authority.

I reckon that a significant number of the clergy who are ordained do not wish to be leaders and a significant number of the people to whom they minister do not want to be led.

As a result, pastoral work is *only* about tea and sympathy instead of *also* being about authority and direction.

But, again, this morning's gospel lesson helps us in this respect.

Jesus, as he so often does, turns the problem into an opportunity. He recognises that the harvest is abundant but that the labourers are few. Of course they are: leadership is physically and mentally draining. As I said a moment ago, any job which involves leadership is tough and that's how it is. But I also said a moment ago that it is the leadership role which is its own reward. The solution then is to find more leaders. Indeed, Jesus says, "therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest".

In the days leading up to the ordinations later this month, there are three days which are called "ember days". They are the days on which we pray that the Holy Spirit encourage vocations so that men and women will offer themselves for ordination. And, of course, we pray also for the particular people who will be ordained here in this Cathedral Church at Peter-tide.

We need to pray for leaders: for tough people who are not daunted by the physical and mental demands of ordained ministry; for people who are not interested in fan clubs and preservation societies; for people who will risk unpopularity in the quest for the lost sheep of our society: that through dynamic and effective ministry first that fewer and fewer people will give up on Christ and his Church and then that more and more people will fall to their knees in worship. We have to believe that it's possible or we cannot be Christ's disciples.

One person, reflecting on this passage from St Matthew's Gospel, said, "The day is short; the task is great; the labourers are idle; the wage is abundant; and the master of the house is urgent."

Too many people think that being nice is the principal qualification for ordination. Well, look where that's got us: 4% of the population in church on a Sunday morning despite the evidence that society is populated by harassed and helpless people like the ones Jesus identified in the cities and villages two thousand years ago.

Aspiring to leadership should be the principal qualification for ordination and then the House of Bishops might not lose so much sleep over their clergy's ability to cope: actually, they might get more than they bargained for — but I don't think that would be a bad thing.

I spend a significant amount of time in King Edward VI School and I see leadership skills being taught and being demonstrated there at every level of the school's activity. There are potential ordinands there — if we *and* they but knew it. I don't see the same evidence in theological colleges: and that's a big problem.

"The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few; therefore ask the lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest." Pray for leadership in the name of the Lord.

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