

# Sermon on the occasion of the ordination of Glen Wesley

Horsham, May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010

We gather here in Horsham on the eve of Pentecost, a most suitable feast as it focuses our attention on the fledgling Church from which we sprang. Since Easter we have been following through the story of those early years from Luke's book of the Acts of the Apostles. They were exciting and heady times but times that should speak to all of us. Today, I should like to take us back to the story from last week's readings, the story of the stoning of Stephen.

Remember how it goes? The Pharisees and the Sanhedrin were up in arms with Stephen's sermon. They accused him of belittling the "traditions of Moses". Anyone who challenged those traditions was guilty of blaspheming against God. Think about that for a moment. What was his sin? Moving away, at least in their estimation, from the "traditions of Moses". Not the Law of God. He was accused of moving away from all of the extras that had been added on by the keepers of the Torah.

Here is the line that led to his stoning: *You stubborn people, with your pagan hearts and pagan ears. You are always resisting the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Can you name a single prophet your ancestors never prosecuted? In the past they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, and now you have become his betrayers, his murders.*

Glen, I am giving you this reading as a reminder to you of the risks that you are taking should you choose to proceed with your ordination to priestly ministry by using the gifts that were given to you at your baptism. You did not come to us via the normal channels. You were an unbeliever, an atheist and then when you came to faith in Jesus Christ it was via an internet Church. I still do not know just how that works – a virtual Church. What is important in that is that you knew nothing of what we hold near and dear as our Anglo Catholic traditions. They were all new to you – and that is part of your giftedness to us. You are different. You are fresh and so you are challenging.

In accepting you for ordination, we the Church, are celebrating these unique gifts, the talents that come to us, from God, through you. We clearly need them, a need recognised by God, and so here you are.

But there is a risk in this and one of the ongoing challenges to your ministry is going to be that you will never be "like the other priests". Thanks be to God! We have plenty of good old fashioned priests of the traditional mold. We do not have an awful lot with your peculiar gifts and talents. But I make this pledge to you today, should you choose to proceed with this ordination, and it is your choice, we, as a Church are not going to demand that you fit in. That you meet all of our expectations of how a priest should live and minister. We will not want you to be a clone of the rest of us, for a part of your giftedness is your difference.

But be warned. We are not a Church that copes well with those who come to us from out of left field. You will be accepting a life of sacrifice, of challenge and of hardship because your different ways of viewing the world and the Kingdom will confuse us at times, for this great and wonderful Church of ours does not always cope well with "being different".

But I want you to take heart from the Scriptures and to gain strength from them. As Stephen said in his sermon, the prophets had a tough time bringing a message to the people that was not the kind of teaching they wanted to hear. They preferred messengers from God who would affirm what they were doing, who would support them and who would avoid challenging them so that they could keep the old time religion exactly the way it was. When the prophets would not do this, the people put them to death.

How did Stephen put it? *Can you name a single prophet your ancestors never persecuted?* A priest's ministry must be prophetic in both the words he preaches and in the way of life he lives. The two go hand in hand. Look at the great prophet John the Baptist. He lived in the desert, wore camel skin clothing, ate honey and locusts and annoyed the heck out of people by insisting that they repent. Doing God's work cost him his head – but all true priest will

have a little bit of John the Baptist in them. He lived what he preached and he drew attention to the Kingdom of God by how he lived and by what he said. There was nothing comfortable and self-serving about the ministry of the Baptist.

Then there was the great Father of the Church, Tertullian. He is remembered for many fine teachings but few more memorable than this one: *as often as we are mowed down by you, the more we grow in numbers; the blood of the Christians is the seed (of the Church)*. He was preaching a message of great significance to the Roman authorities who were seeking to crush the new Christian sect. What he was telling them was that you cannot stop something initiated by God. You can crush the messengers but not stop the message.

Those ancestors of the Sanhedrin thought the same thing. They thought that by killing the prophets, by exiling them from Jerusalem and by locking them away in prisons, the problem they represented would go away. It did not. God just sent more prophets and the message was preached and the nation challenged. Killing the messengers does not stop the message. There is you challenge Glen, to focus not on the hardships of prophetic ministry but on the message you proclaim on word and in action.

Herod thought the same with John the Baptist. Chop off his head and the preaching would stop. Unfortunately for him, the removal of the Baptist from the scene did not stop the divine judgment coming down upon him.

This is precisely what we see with the Sanhedrin and the Son of Man. They did not like his message; did not like his life style; did not warm to being called whitened sepulchres, a brood of vipers, having money changing tables overturned in the Temple and they certainly did not like the fact that people were told that they could go straight to God without having to go through them. And so they dragged him before the courts on trumped up charges, had him flogged and then crucified him. But did it stop the message of the Kingdom of God? NO. The Father raised him from the grave and the Kingdom went on. It has always been thus. It is not about the messenger, it is about the message and you need to keep that firmly in your

mind as you go about ministering as a priest in God's Church.

This is what we see here with Stephen. They did not like Stephen's message and so they stoned him. You know the real irony of this story? They laid their clothes at the feet of Saul, the leader of the gang of thugs who rejected Stephen's preaching. This man Saul was to persecute the Christian Church with zeal yet at the same time he was to himself become the greatest of Christian missionaries and preachers and himself to be put to death on account of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You can kill the messenger but the message goes on. Glen, take that to heart.

You can kill the prophets but you cannot stop the works of God. Sadly, it has ever been thus in the Church of God. Sarah, my youngest daughter is studying *A Man for All Seasons* at school. I am sure most of us have studied it. Remember how it ends? We see the head of Thomas Moore being hacked off and held aloft with the cry: *Behold the traitor!* But Robert Bolt wrote an alternative ending which goes like this: *The common man comes out and says: I'm breathing...Are you breathing too?...It's nice isn't it? It isn't difficult to keep alive friends...just don't make trouble – or if you must make trouble, make the sort of trouble that's expected.*

This is going to be an essential part of your choice Glen. It is always easier to live out your priestly ministry in comfortable ways, where your appointment is secure and among friends who affirm all that you do; a ministry where your stipend is secure and your pathway to retirement mapped out. All you have to do is to not make trouble! Or if you are going to be difficult, be difficult in ways that are expected, accepted and understood. Sadly, true Gospel ministry is not going to be like that. True Gospel ministry is going to involve your death for the sake of the Gospel. If your priestly ministry is comfortable, and is drifting along nicely thank you, then you have probably compromised on something of significance and are no longer fulfilling that which God asked of you when he called you. If his Son suffered and died, why would you expect that your ministry would be any different?

I remind you of these stories Glen because it is important that you understand that your pathway to priestly ministry within the Kingdom of God is not going to be smooth. God is going to ask much of you. Probably not your head on a plate but a great deal of sacrifice nevertheless. You need to be fired up by an

evangelical zeal, but evangelical zeal is not something we understand and accept all that willingly. We desperately need it but find it hard to take on board. You will be misunderstood, our passion will be found to be threatening and your work all that much harder because you do not fit the standard mold. Know all this before you proceed.

Glen, you are going to have to work hard if you are to resist the temptation to allow people to pour you into an institutional model of priesthood that is not you and not a part of what God is offering to us. Do not allow people to impose their vision of the Church on you and do not feel that you have to be anything more than what God has called you to be. After all, like all of us, the only court that really matters in our lives is the final court, when we stand before the throne of God and have to answer for all that we have done or have failed to do. He will judge us according to how well we have used his gifts and not on whether or not we fitted in with what people expected of us. So it is vital that you keep your eyes on God and not on the god of popularity.

In telling you that, I also want to affirm that we do not want more black and white in the Church. We have enough black and white! This world of God's is much more technicolour than we have ever imagined and if we are to reach out to all of God's people who yearn to know him, then we are going to need the kinds of variations in colour that you bring to us. Your greatest gift to us from God is who you are and not what we try to make you to become.

But know this Glen, I am not giving you the right to march over the sensibilities of the people of God you are being ordained to serve. In no way. They are the children of God you are being called to serve, the ones you like as well as the ones you do not like, who perhaps even dislike you. You do not have a choice in this. If they live in the parish to which you are appointed, they are there for you to wash their feet in Christ's name. Not one soul should escape your loving care. And so, it is a tough ask for you to balance the role of the prophet with the role of the traditional priestly ministry – but it can be done. My point is to urge you to never forget that a Church needs prophetic ministry, alongside other forms of ministry but

prophetic ministry will always come at a price to the prophet.

The key thing to remember Glen, is that priesthood is never your own. It is not about you. In fact, it should never be about you. You need to grow in your ability to listen to God. More time with God is to always be preferred to more time with computers, books and other distractions. You cannot fool God. Remember that.

You need to be guided by a strong spiritual director, to have a searching confessor so that you will avoid self-centred ministry. Without ongoing spiritual direction, without regular confession, your priesthood will struggle and the self will control how you carry out your ministry. Never think you can minister without sage advice, without the wisdom of those who have lived a life in the service of God, lay and ordained. Listen to them and never allow yourself to be carried away by your own passion and your own desires.

Make sure that your ministry does not become a career where you consider what is asked of you in terms of how it will impact on your advancement. Serve rather the people of God. You will be at times asked to move outside of your comfort zones, from the places where you are comfortably at home. But my experience is that when God seeks to move you, especially when you do not really want to be moved, he will bless you abundantly for your generosity.

Avoid the temptation to alienate yourself from your brother priests, your brother and sister deacons and the lay ministers with whom you will serve. And for goodness sake, Glen, work alongside your Bishop. A priestly ministry that isolates itself from others engaged in ministry is a ministry that is already dying, if not already dead. All ministry is by its nature collaborative or it is not Christian ministry.

Every day I urge you to pause before going to sleep. Take all of the things that you have done during the day. Everything. Do not leave anything out. Lay those acts, thoughts, plans and words before God for his scrutiny. If there are things that you feel you cannot open up before God, then you have touched upon sin. Do not think that you can hide what you do from his searching eyes, or that you can rationalize what you are doing and feel that you can convince God that what you are doing is after all his will. You might be able to convince the world that you are God's gift to the Church or the parish but that is not the same thing

as convincing God. The more honest you are with God, the more likely you are to know peace and contentment in what you do in your ministry.

Glen, this is really important: if you are not Christ to people then you are not a priest. When people encounter you they must be encountering God. When they hear you speaking and preaching, they must be listening to the words of Jesus Christ. When they follow where you lead them, they need to be following the way of the Kingdom. You will not always be successful in this but it is a quest you need to take seriously. If you cannot be Christ to people, in all of the circumstances of your life, then you cannot be a priest, for that is THE fundamental role of the priest.

Finally, I would like to offer you a final image. It is that of the Last Supper from St John's Gospel. There are two pictures there for us. We all know the most obvious one. We all associate the Last Supper with the giving of the gift of the Lord's Supper to the Church. Priests generally take this supper as a focus of their reflections on their own celebration of the Mass. But we need to make Ballarat

sure that we do not skip over the image that comes first. Before Jesus went on to institute the Eucharist, he did something that is an essential prerequisite for all priests: He washed the feet of his disciples. This is what comes first. Before he broke the bread, he humbled himself and washed the feet of the Twelve.

Significantly, he commanded that his disciples do the same thing. Before they were to presume the right to celebrate Mass, they were to be feet washers. Before you can stand at the altar to lead the congregation in Eucharist you must be known as a washer of the feet of the poor and the marginalized, someone who humbles himself in the service of others, someone who acts as Christ acted.

So there you are Glen. It is a tough ask and it is important that as you now proceed into this celebration of ordination, you know exactly what it is God is asking of you and what we, the Church of God, expects.

**+Michael Hough**