

**Westminster Abbey**

**Monday July 4<sup>th</sup> 2016**

**Fortieth anniversary of the ordination to the priesthood of**

**The Very Revd John Hall, Dean of Westminster**

**Sermon by The Rt Revd Graham James, Bishop of Norwich**

*“We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us...” (II Corinthians 5. 20)*

It is a privilege to preach at this Eucharist, just as it was to be the deacon at John Hall's first mass at St John the Divine, Kennington, forty years ago. In those days John and I were the young hope of the Church of England. Now we are on the brink of becoming blasts from the past. The years seem to have slipped by astonishingly quickly. I vividly remember John's first mass, since the MC taught me how to walk properly in procession and especially down steps in the approved St John the Divine, Kennington manner – at the right speed and so that it looked as if I was gliding. No processional training could have been better for a future Dean of Westminster, for here gliding is compulsory.

John has been an ambassador for Christ, to use St Paul's striking phrase in our epistle, in very different contexts in his ministry. As an ambassador for God, Church and Crown in this abbey church John has regularly received ambassadors, as well as the presidents and monarchs to whom they owe allegiance. But John's diplomatic qualities were perhaps most constructively utilised when he worked on the other side of Dean's Yard at Church House for the National Society and the Education Division. When John was ordained four decades ago the Church of England was somewhat ambivalent about church schools and the value it placed upon them. That is not so now. John has made a huge contribution to the renewal of the Church's confidence in the value of

our schools as part of our mission and service to our communities. It's one of the most striking transformations in the life of the Church in recent years. But John has not only been a Dean and ecclesiastical diplomat. He has been a parish priest too. That's been evident during John's time here in the quality of worship offered and the hospitality given. Such hospitality was never greater than for the visit of Pope Benedict who saw here the worship of the Church of England at its very best, though perhaps not at its most Protestant.

We rightly give thanks to God on these occasions for many years of priestly ministry, but we must have the right perspective on such thanksgiving. Priests are no more committed to our Lord Jesus Christ than many lay people. The sacrament of ordination is not greater than baptism. We cannot improve on what baptism has given us. What is better than becoming a child of God, a member of the body of Christ, and an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven, as the Book of Common Prayer describes the gift of baptism. Yet priests are ordained for the sake of the baptised and all God's people. They are also the public face of the Church.

To be ordained is to take on public liability for the Church. It is not always a comfortable experience to be so identified with the Church as an institution. Yet at the altar, as John demonstrates during this Eucharist, the priest is the public focus of what the Church is and all she aspires to be. A priest's religion can never be private.

Back in 1990 when John was still a parish priest in Streatham, David Hare's play *Racing Demon* had its premiere at the National Theatre. It was about division and conflict in the Church of England. There's always scope for such a play, as there is in Parliament too. I remember going to one of the early performances of *Racing Demon*. Most of the clergy of the Diocese of Southwark seemed to be there. David Hare had done much of his research south of the river. Lionel, the fictional vicar at the heart of the story, was a South Bank cleric of the 1960s. By the late 1980s much of

his energy had been drained. Quite why he had a curate with a rather evangelical disposition no-one attempted to explain. It seemed equally unlikely that such a curate would have an unbelieving girlfriend. But this girl, Frances, rather won my heart in the play. For she was the one who saw most deeply into the character of priesthood. At one point she says:

*“If I were a clergyman, what I would find unbearable is to have to talk about what I believe. Press a button and a clergyman is bound to tell me, at once. Even if he doesn’t know me very well. He has to tell me his innermost beliefs. That’s what’s undignified. That’s why clergymen are funny, I am afraid. Because they are not allowed to be private. They wear their inside on their outside.”*

This wearing of your inside on your outside is one of the most important things to grasp about being a priest. It relates very closely to that ministry of reconciliation about which Paul wrote to the Corinthians. *“We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.”* (II Corinthians 5.20). Paul and his co-workers declare what God has done in Christ for the world and live it too. It is true that every Christian is called to be an ambassador for Christ in Paul’s theology, but priests exemplify this public witness, and give confidence to God’s people in their own.

Not long ago I was on a late running train from Norwich to London. It is a common enough experience for those of us who travel into Liverpool Street. The train was crowded. I sneezed. The woman sitting next to me said *“Bless you”*. Then she took a look at me and for the first time noticed my clerical collar, and said *“sorry”*. Clearly she thought she had trespassed on my professional territory. I told her I liked receiving blessings. A conversation about faith followed, rather publicly, since the other passengers around us were, to use a technical theological term, *“earwiggling”*.

It was that conversation which prompted me to remember the words of Frances, the curate's girlfriend, in David Hare's play. But there is one thing Frances didn't mention which is at the heart of priests being able to wear their inside on the outside. They must sustain their vision of God. Without a vision of God, a good pastoral priest can become weighed down and even diminished by taking on all the traumas and troubles of the world around. Without a vision of God, an effective priestly leader can become all absorbed in the organisational life of the Church as an institution. Think of the temptations and traps lurking in the gilded complexity of this abbey church. Ponder the capacity for self-delusion in episcopal office. Lose our vision of the eternal God and we will undermine the ambassadorial status which Jesus Christ so generously gives us. That's why time set aside to be with God, the disciplines of the priestly life, are so important. They lie at the heart of John's ministry which is why it has been so fruitful.

Priests are called to see everything in the context of eternity. The gift of their time in pastoral care is a reflection of the eternity they behold. But they must also give time to God himself. It is no accident that at the very beginning of Mark's gospel when the whole of Capernaum was gathered seeking to gain access to Jesus, he leaves them and goes off to a deserted place to pray. The crowds are pressing for his attention. The demands upon him are enormous. But he gives priority to his communion with his heavenly Father, the creator and sustainer of all. Jesus goes to a desert place, to the place of temptation overcome. It's that place which becomes the source of spiritual solace. Priests may wear their inside on their outside but if they have no hidden life with God it is unlikely their ministries will be sustained creatively for very long.

One final word. A few days ago the Battle of the Somme was remembered movingly here. It is good to remember a century on, when even survivors of the Second World War have become few. The Church of England in the inter-war years was led for much of the time by Cosmo

Gordon Lang. He died in late 1945, a few months after the Second World War had ended. He was rushing to catch a train at Kew Gardens and collapsed outside a fishmonger's shop. A passer-by sounded the alarm and a large police car turned up and took Lang to Richmond Hospital. A lady doctor came out, took one look at him, pronounced him dead and said she wouldn't admit the body. So the police car moved on to the public mortuary. There is an unverified story that when the staff at the mortuary received the body they searched the pockets of Lang's clothes to get some clue as to the identity of this priest. They knew he was ordained because he was wearing a clerical collar. But they did not recognise the former Archbishop of Canterbury who had crowned King George VI less than a decade earlier in this great Abbey church. Finding nothing to identify him, it's said they attached a label to his body on which was written "*An unknown clergyman*". I rather hope the story is true. For they would have known the most important things about him. That he was a human being. That he was a priest. That his allegiance was to Jesus Christ. Nothing else needed to be known. These things last when all else is forgotten.

John, we give thanks today for your humanity and your ministry to the known and unknown and as one of Christ's priestly ambassadors in the Church of God. Amen.