

Icons of Christ: A Sermon Preached at the Ordination of David Booman to the Priesthood

Isa. 6:1-8

Psalm 119:33-40

Phil. 4:4-9

John 10:1-16



David,

I want to thank you for asking me to preach at your ordination. I am a layperson, which means that I am a sheep, not a shepherd. It is a great honor for a sheep to address someone who is on the verge of becoming a shepherd. Perhaps when you've been a sheep as long as I have, and you've had the dubious privilege of observing more shepherds than I can count, you may be able to give some advice to a shepherd who is about to be turned loose on the flock. Of course, not all metaphors hold up completely. I've also been a lay person long enough to know how lay people too often treat their priests. A lot of these sheep have teeth. So be forewarned, you're also a

shepherd who is being turned loose in the midst of wolves, some of whom are dressed up just like sheep.

There is another image besides Shepherd that the church applies to those in ordained ministry. You will be ordained this morning to be a priest. What is a priest? If we look to the epistle to the Hebrews, we read: “[W]e have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man.” (Heb. 8:1) What is a shepherd? In our gospel reading this morning, we read “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11) So my first observation is that there is only one. Jesus is the One High Priest, and Jesus is the the One Shepherd.

The Reformation and Catholic traditions divide at this point. The Reformation tradition says that, because Jesus Christ is the one High Priest, the ordained are not priests. The Catholic tradition says that because there is the one High Priest, the ordained are those who share in Christ’s priesthood. I am going to engage in some typical Anglican fudge here by quoting the Anglican Divine George Herbert. In *The Country Parson*, Herbert writes: “A Pastor is the Deputy of Christ for the reducing of Man to the Obedience of God.” Herbert goes on to say that, after Christ’s resurrection and ascension, “Christ being not to continue on earth, but after he had fulfilled the work of Reconciliation, to be received up into heaven, he constituted Deputies in his place, and these are Priests.” Herbert says that the priest does that which Christ did, by Christ’s authority, as his “vice-regent.” Most important, however, the priest also does it “after [Christ’s] manner.”

It helps, I think, to understand the priest as an icon of Christ. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4, “For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as

your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." (vs. 5-7) The priest is not Christ. The priest is a jar of clay. The priest represents Christ primarily in pointing away from him or herself, by pointing to Christ. But the priest also represents Christ in that he or she shares in Christ's suffering. Paul goes on to say, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." (vs. 8-10) As George Herbert, says, the priest does what Christ did "in his manner."

I think this gets us some way toward resolving the apparently irreconcilable differences between Evangelical and Catholic understandings of priesthood. The priest does represent Christ, but as an icon. The priest is an icon of Christ who points away from himself and his own competence to the competence of the crucified and risen Christ. It is Christ who saves, not the priest. But the priest also takes up the ministry of Christ, "after his manner," and that will mean suffering.

The first way in which the priest points to Christ is in the area of authority. There is an authority that comes with being a priest, and it is an essential part of the job. Post-modern culture does not like authority, and the church has been trying to downplay that part of the priest's mission for decades now. One of the chief ways in which the twentieth century church did that was by substituting different understandings of authority for the priest's authority. The priest was no longer an icon of Christ, but a therapist, a social worker, or the Chief Operating Officer of the

congregation.

At the same time, when people are uncertain about the source of their authority, they become frightened, and they fall back on their own personal authority. I have met plenty of clergy who have no problem imagining themselves to be icons of Christ, but the icon they prefer is that of Christ enthroned in glory, *Christus Pantokrator*, or if not Christ, perhaps *Dirty Harry*. We have all known these kinds of priests and bishops. The contemporary Anglican mess, with its depositions of clergy for abandonment of communion, and lawsuits over property, and depriving people of worship space they have built and paid for, for decades or even centuries, is a particularly bleak example. If it is any comfort, misuse of clerical power is not new. If you want some very practical examples of both good and bad Anglican clerical leadership, I would suggest reading the novels of the nineteenth century author Anthony Trollope.

In the 1st epistle of Peter, the apostle explains the proper type of priestly leadership: "Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising authority, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you, not for shameful gain, but eagerly, not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock." (1 Peter 5:2-3) David, you are called to exercise authority as did Jesus, who said "[W]hoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matt. 20:26-28) As the gospel reading states this morning, the role of the Shepherd is to lay down his life for the sheep. That kind of leadership is more difficult than being a social worker or a CEO. It demands more long suffering than does top-down authority. You cannot do it unless you love the people you are called to serve, and unless you are willing to suffer.

So remember, as a priest, you do not act on your own

authority. It is not your administrative abilities or your counseling skills or your charismatic personality, and certainly not your clever jokes in the pulpit that give you your authority. Your ministry as a shepherd is a sharing in the ministry of the One Shepherd. Your authority as a shepherd comes from outside of yourself. The only authority you have is that which you share with the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. It is an awesome responsibility.

The second way in which the priest points to Christ is in the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. I would suggest that this is actually the most important part of your job, what you do on Sunday morning. Again, this is an area where the Catholic and Reformation traditions love to part ways. Catholic preaching is notoriously bad, because, it is presumed, the important thing is the sacraments. Conversely, there often seems to be a direct correlation between the high emphasis that Protestants place on preaching and the banality of Protestant worship. David, you are being ordained as an Anglican priest, so you cannot enjoy either excuse. You belong to the church of Thomas Cranmer's liturgy and John Donne's sermons. You have to do both, and do both well.

When I told the Trinity seminary faculty that you had asked me to preach at your ordination, they asked why I didn't just suggest that you do it. Nonetheless, although I know you are already a fine preacher, I am going to make some suggestions. First, the primary job of the preacher is to communicate the word of God about Christ as contained in the Scriptures. Do not forget that the point of preaching is, once again, to point to Christ. Your sermons should focus on the Good Shepherd, who Jesus is, and what Jesus did. Who is Jesus? He is the Son of God, the incarnate Word become flesh, the second person of the Trinity. What did Jesus do? He became human, he died for our sins, he rose from the dead, and he is coming again. That is the gospel. That is what you are to preach.

You also need to know the Scriptures, and you need to know the central themes of the Scriptures; your theology and spirituality need to be formed by the central content of the Scriptures, and that is what you should preach about. Your pet political causes are not the gospel. Moralistic exhortations about what people should or should not do, are not the gospel. And, although, as a theologian, it is painful for me to say, even your favorite theological commitments are not the gospel. The gospel is not a doctrine about imputation or infusion or predestination or free will, or even the proper way to divide law and gospel. And the gospel is certainly not the proper theory of apostolic succession or preaching about the correct number of sacraments. The gospel is that Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead, and is coming again. The good news is about Jesus Christ, and his person and work, and that is what you need to come back to in your preaching, over and over.

And if you do that you will become an icon of Christ, and God will speak through your words. As George Herbert wrote:

Lord, how can man preach thy eternal word?
He is a brittle crazy glass
Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford
This glorious and transcendent place
To be a window, through thy grace.
(George Herbert, "The Windows")

The administration of the sacraments and the celebration of the Liturgy is the other really important thing you will do on Sunday morning. As sacramental Christians, Anglicans do not believe that Christian worship is either a matter of communicating cognitive intellectual information or of emotional manipulation. Sunday morning worship is neither the lecture hall nor the Heinz Field Stadium. Sunday morning worship involves doing things, and performing certain rituals because the risen Christ communicates himself to us in more than words. Thomas Cranmer wrote that through the sacraments

“we receive Christ himself . . . in baptism it is done in respect of regeneration, and in the holy communion in respect of nourishment and augmentation.” (*Writings and Disputations*, Parker Society, vol. 1, 25) Sharing in Christ’s body and blood through the eating of broken bread and the drinking of consecrated wine is the means by which the risen Christ shares his risen life with the church, so that, as the Prayer of Humble Access states, “we may continually dwell in him, and he in us, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his Body, and our souls washed through his most precious Blood.”

I want to say just a bit about the liturgy. As a shepherd, your chief job in leading worship is to help the congregation share in something objective and outside ourselves that has been given to the church. As Anglicans, we have something really precious in the liturgy. Prayer Book worship is rooted in a history that goes back almost two thousand years. The basic structure of worship in Word and Sacrament can be found in the writings of Justin Martyr in the second century. Traditional Anglican hymnals contain hymns from every era of the church’s history. The theology of many of those hymns is profound.

As a priest, it is not your responsibility to create something new or clever. Worship is not entertainment. It is not about manipulating emotions. Nor is worship just about change for the sake of change. C. S. Lewis talks about this a little in his book *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* when he complains about liturgical novelty. It is distracting, Lewis complains, constantly to be asking oneself “What on earth is he up to now?” Lewis reminds the clergy: “I wish they’d remember that the charge to Peter was Feed my sheep; not Try experiments on my rats, or even, Teach my performing dogs new tricks.” (C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1963, 1964), p. 5.) And, again, finally, the purpose of the liturgy is to point to Christ. If it does not do that, the liturgy has failed in its

purpose.

The next way in which the priest acts as an Icon of Christ who points away from himself to Christ is the Power of the Keys. The power of the keys is the priest's authority to proclaim Christ's forgiveness to the repentant. Reformation Christians get uncomfortable here, but we need to be reminded that Anglicans have always affirmed that this is an authority that Christ has given to his church. The Anglican Reformer John Jewel stated: "Moreover, we say that Christ hath given to His ministers power to bind, to loose, to open, to shut. And that the office of loosing consisteth in this point: that the minister should . . . offer by the preaching of the Gospel the merits of Christ and full pardon, to such as have lowly and contrite hearts, and do unfeignedly repent themselves, pronouncing unto the same a sure and undoubted forgiveness of their sins, and hope of everlasting salvation." ("Apology of the Church of England")

Private confession is not a requirement for Anglicans, but it is something that the church offers, and it is a wonderful gift to be able to pronounce Christ's forgiveness. This is not in conflict with the Reformation understanding of justification by faith alone; it is a way of making forgiveness concrete and objective. When you get beyond talking about superficialities with people, you will discover that they often carry tremendous weights of guilt, even Christians, and, sometimes, especially Christians. Sacramental confession can be a way to leave that behind. When I first became an Episcopalian, I asked a priest friend what was the point of having a sacramental rite of confession. Couldn't we just confess our sins to God in the privacy of our bedroom? He responded that I could confess my sins to my bed post, but my bed post couldn't absolve me.

Again, it is important to remember, that as a priest, you do not proclaim forgiveness on your own authority. You are a sinner, just like the person who comes to you. The reading

from Isaiah is particularly helpful here. We are all people of unclean lips, dwelling in the midst of a people of unclean lips. But One greater than a seraphim has touched our lips, and he has said, "Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." It is because Christ has forgiven you, that you, as a priest can proclaim that Christ forgives others. In order to do this, you yourself need to acknowledge your own sins, and you need to accept Christ's forgiveness.

And, a little more advice about preaching: It is important that clergy proclaim the gospel in such a way that it can be heard as a message of forgiveness – that it really is good news. Preachers too often use the pulpit to beat up on their congregation for all the things that make the priest unhappy. Then they're surprised when the congregation does not repent.

Finally, there is one last way in which the priest acts as an icon and shepherd of Christ. The priest is pastor and spiritual director. The words "pastor" and "pastoral" come from the Latin word that means "shepherd." There is a uniquely pastoral dimension to Anglican ministry. The traditional exhortations given to the priest at ordination speak to this responsibility. I am not going to repeat them because you are going to hear them in a few minutes.

George Herbert again, provides a wonderful example of ideal Anglican pastoral practice. He writes that "THE Country Parson upon the afternoons in the week-days takes occasion sometimes to visit in person, now one quarter of his parish, now another." Herbert believes that it is important to visit people when they are about their daily life and business because, then, they will not be on what we might call their "best Sunday behavior." When I was younger, it was not unusual at all for the pastor to simply show up at the door for a visit without warning. These days that might be a real surprise. Outside of an English country village, it would probably be difficult to have the kind of intimate acquaintance with your congregation that Herbert expected, but

one of your responsibilities as a priest is to get to know your parishioners, to spend time with them, to pray with them, to baptize them, to marry them, to bury them.

I am going to provide a personal anecdote here, and tell you about a pastor named Danny. Two years before I came to teach at Trinity School for Ministry, my father had a major stroke. After that stroke, he could not speak, and he was never quite the same person. I took about six months off from work and moved to Arizona to help my mother care for my father as he recovered. That's where I met Danny. My family are all Southern Baptists. As an Anglican, I'm the black sheep of the family. Danny was my parents' pastor. Danny had been a Tennessee farmer who got a call to go into the ministry when he was in his early forties. By Anglican standards, Danny was not promising. His sermons were long and repetitive, and they were not expository readings of Scripture. Danny had little knowledge of what at Trinity School for Ministry, we call "biblical theology." When it came to church history and systematic theology, Danny did not know the Council of Chalcedon from the local elementary school Student Council.

But Danny knew what pastoral care was about. He was the one who met me at the Tucson airport and drove me to the hospital to be with my father. During the six months when I lived with my parents, Danny would regularly appear at the door at least once or twice a week and spend an hour or so engaged in conversation with my father. Remember my father could not talk, so Danny did all the talking. During those hours, both Danny and my father would laugh uproariously. At the end, when Danny would get ready to leave, he would ask my father if he wanted prayer. We were not always sure what my father could understand after his stroke, but he would always close his eyes at this point, and Danny would pray for him.

About a year after the stroke my father died, and Danny, along with my mother, was at my father's bedside, when he died. I flew back to Arizona to attend the funeral. Since he was my

parents' pastor, I assumed that Danny would perform the funeral, but he insisted that, since I had studied theology, I should preach, and I should lead the service. So Danny and I did the service together; I put together a modified version of the Burial Service from the Prayer Book, and I preached. And, in that way, I was able to say goodbye to my father. During that last year of my father's life, I had thought that Danny was providing pastoral care for my father, but I came to realize that he was providing pastoral care for me as well. And, for that, I am tremendously grateful.

Despite his lack of what Anglicans might consider professional expertise, Pastor Danny understood something about the heart of pastoral care. It is not about solving people's problems. Only Jesus can do that. It is about taking the time to be with people, to love them, to pray with them, and to share in their joys and their sorrows. And that is one of the best ways to point to Christ.

David, at this point I'm just about ready to wrap things up. I've told you about what I think are your main responsibilities as a priest, an icon of Christ, who is a servant who preaches the word, who administers the sacraments, who celebrates the liturgy, who pronounces absolution, and who cares for his flock. But I want to add one thing more, which I'll summarize with the single word "Joy." The epistle reading tells us to "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice." Paul goes on to write, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

David, as a priest, you have taken on an awesome responsibility. It is a daunting prospect to think about being an icon of Christ, of sharing in Christ's sufferings, of bearing the burden of caring for a congregation. One might think that the best way to prepare for this prospect is to grit your teeth, furrow your brow, and get steely-eyed. And, again, if it were a job that you had to do, anything less

would seem to be irresponsible. But, once again, to be an icon of Christ means that this is not a job that you have to do. This is a job only Jesus Christ can do, he has done it for two thousand years, and he will now do it through you. And this is good news. The message you have to proclaim is also good news. Jesus Christ has died and risen so that we can be forgiven. Christ has enabled us to share in the divine life that is the Triune Love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And Christ has called you to be an ambassador of that Love. This is grounds for rejoicing. Christ has called you to lead his people in worship, to share with them his body and blood so that they may become his body. That is a "shout out loud" reason for joy.

I am going to confess something to you, David. Over the years that I have known you, I have noticed something in you that I recognize in myself. I am a bit of an Eeyore. From time to time, I need to be reminded that Christianity is about the resurrection as well as the cross. I would encourage you to remember as you prepare to become an icon of Christ that you will not only share in Christ's sufferings but also rejoice in his resurrection.

To help you remember that, I am going to give to you this morning a small gift, which I suggest you keep next to your Bible and your Prayer Book. It is a kazoo. There are going to be times as priest when you may well find yourself feeling overwhelmed by the duties of a Shepherd. The first thing you should do is pray. As the apostle Paul writes, do not be anxious, but let your requests be known to God. With thanksgiving. After that, pick up the kazoo.

Rejoice, my Brother. You have been called to be an icon of Christ!