

## ORDAINED MINISTRY

**PREACHER : The Rev'd Jeremy Worthen, Principal of SEITE**

(PROPER 19, YEAR B)  
Rochester Cathedral, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2006  
at the 10.30am Eucharist

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I don't know about you, but by a couple of weeks into September the summer holidays start to seem to me like a long time ago. Maybe that's partly about working in an educational institution where they tend to be among the most intense weeks of the year. Still, some memories from our time in south-west France remain vivid, and among them would be one of the novels that I read by the pool, a book called *Gilead*, by Marilynne Robinson. Early on in the novel, the narrator recalls how as a child he had baptised some kittens in a local pond. Now a rapidly ageing Congregationalist minister, he reflects that however childish and bizarre that act may have been, "There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily.... The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time. I don't wish to be urging the ministry upon you," he writes to his young son, "but there are some advantages you might not know to take into account if I did not point them out" (pp. 26-27). One of the great gifts of ordained ministry, according to John Ames, the name of the character in the novel, is the gift of blessing, speaking God's will for good into the concrete circumstances of people's lives. And that's really all I'd like to put to you this morning: that we can think of ordained ministry as shaped by the gift and the responsibility of blessing. I think that makes it a wonderful thing in the life of the church, something to give thanks for, but also something that precisely because it is both powerful and precious needs to be handled with care, above all by those entrusted with it.

That cautionary note is clearly echoed at the start of our New Testament lesson for today: "Not many of you should become teachers," writes James in his letter (3:1). Now, we need to be clear about what James means by teachers here. This isn't a text to be contrasted with Government-funded advertising campaigns to "Use your head – teach" – it's not about the people who will be taking classes for some of you come Monday morning. While there's no precise equivalent for the ordained ministry that we know today in the New Testament documents, it seems that the "teachers" that James has in mind in his letter would have much in common with the deacons, priests and bishops who make up the ordained ministry in the Anglican Church, and perhaps particularly priests, the variety of ordained ministers most of us are likely to be dealing with more often than the others. For James, teachers are people entrusted with responsibility for guiding the Christian community – and it is because they have this responsibility that James warns his readers about presuming too easily that this might be a job for them: "for you know that we who teach" – and notice the "we" in that sentence – "will be judged with greater strictness." Maybe not a great text to use at the next Vocations Day in the diocese. Yet the negative tone here reflects a positive insight. Teachers in James's church, like ordained ministers in our church, are given serious responsibilities, responsibilities that they hold for life (a teacher, like a priest, is something you become and remain until you die, not just a job that you do for a while and see if it suits you). And with responsibility goes accountability. Ordained ministers take on their responsibilities before God – as the candidates for the diaconate did in the ordination service here in this Cathedral last weekend. And ordained

ministers are also therefore accountable before God. According to James, that means they “will be judged with greater strictness.” And just in case any teachers – or ordained ministers here – think that judgment is no big deal for them given how generally good and beyond reproach they are, James immediately adds “For we all make many mistakes.”

What’s particularly interesting about this passage for us as we consider ordained ministry in our service today is that James launches straight off from this observation that we all get things wrong sometimes into an extended discussion of how easy and how dangerous it is to get things wrong as soon as we start talking. Although he uses language and imagery that might seem a bit dated or obscure to us now, surely we can recognize his major point about how easily we end up saying things without really “meaning” to – “it just slipped out,” we claim, or “I didn’t mean to say it like that.” Too often our words don’t correspond to our intentions or match the values by which we claim to live. We can probably all think of occasions when we’ve found ourselves regretting what we’ve said before we’ve even finished saying it, or wondering in retrospect what possessed us to say something we should surely have known would cause all manner of hurt and trouble. And that’s James’s next point: that this tiny thing, the tongue, can cause such an awful lot of problems. Just a few words can trigger a sequence of exchanges that precipitates a complete breakdown in relationships. You know the kind of thing: person A expresses themselves just a bit more abruptly or forcefully than usual, person B then becomes convinced that person A is harbouring some tremendous grudge against them and says as much to person C, person C tells person D that person A hates person B and is persecuting them terribly, person D starts plotting about how to cut vicious persecutor A down to size and rally support for poor innocent B, etc. Well, you can make up your own story about how these things go – or think of examples from real life. But I’d like to come back to the fact that when James wants to give a specific instance of the kind of mistakes for which teachers especially will be judged, he turns immediately to the things that go wrong when we open our mouths. Now, why should that be?

Well, look at the example he goes on to give of the terrible inconsistency that can exist between the different things that we do with words in our lives. “With the tongue we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be.” Clearly, there is a general point here that applies to all members of the Church. We all join in blessing God through our worship this morning, and yet we are all likely, at some point this week, to curse, or to put it more colloquially, slag off some person who in fact bears the image of this God we claim to bless and honour. And this ought not to be. But remember the start of the passage and James’ warning that we – those who teach, those who are ordained – will be judged with greater strictness. For those or us who are ordained have, as John Ames suggests in Robinson’s novel, particular responsibility, indeed particular authority, both to bless God on behalf of the community and “to bless the people in God’s name,” to quote from the ordination service for priests. And this duty and calling is linked to particular words, to the liturgical action of blessing, although it is not exhausted by it: blessing the people should be a way of life, a mark of character, and shape how the priest approaches all kinds of pastoral and liturgical ministry, as John Ames indeed proposes in the case of baptism. Similarly, priests bless God on behalf of the people when, again in the words of the new Ordinal, they “preside at the Lord’s table and lead his people in worship.” Again, there are specific words and actions that focus this ministry of blessing towards God – above all the liturgy of the Eucharist. But blessing God is not something the priest does only at the altar-table or when saying prescribed words. Speaking the praises of God should also be a way of life and mark of character – seeking to draw all we meet into that circle of praise, not cutting anyone off from it by hurtful, resentful or

dismissive words and actions. And then there are always going to be questions for God's people about just how it is that I can bless God in this place, in the darkness of this tragedy, about how God's blessing of me in Christ through the power of word and sacraments can actually transform this situation in which I seem to be stuck. And therefore the priestly ministry of blessing needs also to involve proclamation, preaching and teaching. It's not enough just to do wonderful liturgy, although I firmly believe that wonderful liturgy is tremendously important. The priest is also, to go back to James's word, a teacher – someone who can interpret those liturgical acts and the saving mystery of which they speak to the people who assemble to celebrate them, someone who can relate them to the real challenges those people face in their day-to-day lives.

What I am suggesting, then, is simply that one way to understand ordained ministry is as a ministry shaped by blessing – blessing God on behalf of the people, blessing the people in the name of God, and helping those people to discern how that blessing can transform their lives in all their complexity, beauty and pain. All Christians can bless and be a blessing, but ordained ministers commit themselves to a form of life in the church shaped by the particular role of expressing God's word of blessing, at pivotal points where God draws near in praise, worship, prayer and conscious need. And the Church asks that those who will express that word through liturgical and pastoral action seek themselves to live lives that correspond to it. It asks, as does James, that we be consistent – that what we say when we are robed and up the front or consciously exercising pastoral care matches who we are day by day, in running meetings, relating to our families, dealing with our neighbours on our day off. James is right to warn people against taking on such responsibilities too lightly. In the end, we do not have ordained ministry because some people like that sort of thing or are good at it or find fulfilment in it. We have life-long ordained ministry, with all the difficulties and dangers it involves, not least the abuse of authority and power, because through it God brings blessing to the Church. Ordained ministry is a gift to the Church, for the sake of the Church, not for the sake of those who happen to be entrusted with it.

A final question. Why should anyone at all get involved in ordained ministry, if we're going to end up judged with greater strictness and cannot presume that there's anything in it for us in the meantime? At the end of the novel that I started off by quoting, John Ames, the old minister, finds himself exercising the gift of blessing one last time. I don't want to spoil it for you if you would like to read the novel for yourself, but in the final pages he finds himself saying goodbye to his godson, against whom, he comes to realise, he has harboured tremendous resentment and ill-feeling for half a life-time, buried deep beneath that constant veneer of ministerial niceness. He realises that while he has blessed God as a minister he has cursed one made in the likeness of God in his heart. And as they sit there together waiting for the bus that will take him away, his godson, now a grown man, asks for his blessing. After describing the profound exchange that follows, John Ames writes, "Well, anyway, I told him it was an honour to bless him. And that was absolutely true. In fact I'd have gone through seminary and ordination and all the years intervening for that one moment." Of course, this is only a novel, only a story. But to be someone through whom the blessing of the creator flows out to the creation and then back again, through specific acts and particular interactions – it is a gift, not a rank or right or position, but a wonderful gift. Whether or not you are ordained, give thanks for it, and pray that those who hold the gift for the sake of the Church treasure it with their whole heart, their whole life.