Sermon for the Ordination of Christopher Cole at St. James’ Church, Hendersonville, NC

Bastille Day, 2012

I had several nice conversations before this service. Four lay people said they were looking forward to my sermon. Three clergy asked me how long my sermon would be. Father Remer even offered to time the sermon. I do appreciate his generous offer.

Matthew’s Gospel gives us a Jesus of the Land, of the Land of Israel and Judah. Jesus went about the cities and villages of the Land. He preached in houses of worship and in public squares. He healed the sick and had compassion on the people. He informed his disciples that the “harassed and helpless” people needed a shepherd. Jesus was looking for a few good shepherds—and so the same for the Church in its long Christian tradition.

Jesus gives us in Chapter 10 of Matthew’s Gospel a rather detailed job description for a good shepherd. The first order is to proclaim the good news—and cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the leper, and cast out demons. That’s the ethic of shepherding in Jesus’ name. The etiquette of the shepherding life is quite simple: take few provisions, travel lightly and move from town to town.

We are here today to acknowledge that the Jesus of the Land also calls upon particular men and women. Today we celebrate that Jesus has come to Chris Cole—and called him to be a good shepherd, a priest in the tradition of “One Lord, one Faith and one Baptism.”

When Bishop Taylor places holy hands on Chris’ head, Chris will be made a priest in God’s Church. He will be filled with grace and power—to do what Jesus told his disciples to do in the land we now call holy. In the sacramental moment in which we all will participate, Chris will be changed. There is an ontological change—his very being will be different. He takes on a particular habit—the outward encounters the inward, the visible meets the spiritual. We will never fully comprehend these mysterious connections. The great architect of Anglican thought, George Herbert, spoke of the ordained as “unfit for holy Writ.” The one unfit—that would be you, Chris--becomes the proclaimer of the Gospel and the bearer of sacraments.

It is all rather odd. Many people upon ordination become like ancient monsignors—entitled and very special (I am grateful to Bill Stafford for this observation). Resist that temptation, Chris! The ordained often wear the habits of office as special garments—often as special, personal garments. They find themselves upon pedestals—either by their own action or by the action of others. This very service is risky terrain. The words encourage certain narcissism. It is easy to assume that this service is about the ordinand. We are not saying prayers over a special person. We are not placing holy hands on one who is set apart by his own merits. Rather, we pray today that the Holy Spirit will be given to Chris in a particular way as God wills. We pray that Chris will be filled with grace and empowered by the God of Jesus. We are here today because we believe that God still makes people priests in God’s Church. We are here because we believe the Church, like the Lord of the Church, still yearns for a few good shepherds.
This priestly ordination is about Christ’s ministry in the world, about God’s continuing ministry in the world which God loves so much. This service is about one who is becoming a vicar of Christ—one who will recall in word and deed the good news of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. We are here today because of the saving Gospel of the incarnate Word. Chris is made a priest for the Church and for the world. He becomes an icon of God’s mission for the Church and in the world. A priest proclaims the Word as he or she has a deep encounter with Scripture. Is priesthood in the end not the living of Scripture itself?

So, I hope you are seeing that this is a day of great mystery. Not a graduation day. Not a commissioning day. We are acknowledging that Jesus has called on Chris. But this day must not be about you, Chris. It is about what God is doing to work out God’s purposes for the earth and for the human family. You are stepping into something cosmic and big, holy and mysterious, sacred—and yet utterly common and of this world. Ordination will not make you special. It will, however, make you holy.

The Word of God came down to us and lived among us as a slave. Henri Nouwen has said that the divine way is indeed the downward way. A humble girl in an unknown town in Galilee was chosen to become the God Bearer. So, you today, Chris, are entering a life of downward mobility—not what you wanted to hear! You will be called to empty yourself not to fill yourself. Tertullian spoke of “grace-healed eyes.” These are the eyes you will need to serve the “harassed and helpless” the Bread and Wine, the Body and Blood of our Lord.

Yes, by now we should all conclude that we are setting up Chris to do the impossible. God, on the other hand, is calling Chris only to be his very self as a child of God. God is reminding Chris in this service that he was made to be a priest and that it is all he can really do in this world. The vocation is clear.

We are never ready to accept the downwardly mobile life. We are never fit for the ordained habit. This is true for all who lead in the Church. We are never ready to proclaim the Gospel or to bear the sacraments. It is said that when a Southern Baptist is preparing for worship, he goes to a quiet place to pray. Often that place as a picture of Jesus on the wall—with the words: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” The Roman Catholic priest, on the other hand, vests in a room where there is often a crucifix, reminding the proclaimer and bearer that he follows one who hung on a cross and suffered for the whole world.

Sadly, Episcopal priests most often get vested in rooms which have full-length mirrors. Appearances matter but....

So I return to the dangers of narcissism in this service and in living the craft of priesthood. Most of us want success, fame, influence, power and money. So, we look into the mirror to check out our progress. We have ambitions and we long for fulfillment. So, we look into the mirror and all the wrong places.

Chris, you must read the dour Welsh poet, R. S. Thomas. In his poem, “The Priest,” he laments:
The priest picks his way, through the parish. Eyes watch him from windows, from the farms; hearts wanting him to come near, the flesh rejects him.

Priests have a long way to go, the people wait for them to come to them over the broken glass of their vows.

Thomas then concludes:

“Crippled soul,” do you say? looking at him from the mind’s height, “limping through life on his prayers. There are other people in the world, sitting at table contented, though the broken body and the shed blood are not on the menu.

When you look into the full length mirror in the sacristies of places like St. James’ in Hendersonville and Holy Innocents in Atlanta, look deeply into the “broken glass” of your life and vows. All of us serve the Risen Lord out of our complexity and ambiguity. We are “crippled souls” who share the “broken body and the shed blood” of our Lord and Savior. “Limp” through life on your prayers. Priests preside at a holy sacrifice time and time again, even as their lives are a living sacrifice for the One who has gone before us and who prepares a place for us that is green and fertile for eternity. Chris, being a priest is worth a life—even your one, precious life as a Child of God.

James Barney Hawkins IV

Lessons:

Isaiah 6:1-8
Psalm 132: 8-19
Phillippians 4: 4-9
Matthew 9: 35-38