

Sermons, Speeches & Addresses

Bishop Richard – Susan Goff Consecration

28th July 2012



It is a good time to be leaving England – Manchester Airport's departure lounges were almost deserted on Thursday as the world was converging on London for the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, where they watched:

2 goats
3 cows
9 geese
10 chickens
10 ducks
12 horses
70 sheep

making their own nod in the direction of Susan and her love of God's creation. However spectacular all this may have been, we Brits have proved that we can be a little accident-prone – especially over Korean flags, when you can guess that some hapless official though that getting something connected with a far-flung peninsular was good enough.

Like most of you at this time of year, I've been doing some bargain hunting in the summer sales. I've even been getting my eye in for what might be available over here – and I've not been disappointed. The American Fellowship Church has a sale on at the moment and their instant online ordinations now cost only \$30; according to their website, this will entitle you to call yourself Minister, Preacher, Pastor, Chaplain, Priest, Priestess (if you must) – and, yes by now you've guessed it – even Bishop.

I don't think that either the Episcopal Church or the Church of England is in communion with the American Fellowship Church but what still baffles me about what I read on their website is that there is no need to be called by God, or for your call to be recognised by others - two of the key things that have called Susan to this point.

Now I agree, it may be debateable as to whether the "Voice of the People is, indeed, the Voice of God". The results of democracy may not be self-evidently good. As the late Archbishop Michael Ramsay observed: "It is a pity that the leaders of the Church are so rotten. Yes indeed! It is a worse pity," he goes on to observe "that, when leaders are picked, there is only you to pick them from!" We are, as they say, where we are.

However, from across the pond we, from your link Diocese of Liverpool, have looked on with some considerable admiration as your democratic processes have sought to be faithful to the will of God in the election of the new Suffragan Bishop of Virginia. Your thoroughness is quite extraordinary – and it demands from the candidates a staggering degree of graciousness. And stamina is an absolute necessity for all concerned in discerning God's call.

Today, the call of Bishop-elect Goff – and I guess I shall be the last person to address her thus - is recognised by us. Each one of us - whether we are one of the 37 members of Susan's family present today, or one of her friends, colleagues, acquaintances, fellow members of this diocese, or just simply well-wishers - by being here is showing our agreement, our support and our encouragement for what is to happen in this service. You may not actually quite know why you are here, nor indeed may you quite understand the part you have played in helping Susan respond to God's call. In fact, it may be that you nearly didn't get here at all – and indeed, that Susan herself feels like that.

A Jewish lady I know, called Agnes, makes a habit of saying “I nearly didn’t get here.” Her audience then usually wonder whether she had missed the bus, or something similar, and ask her to explain. And invariably she replies that when she was a baby she and her mother were taken off to the gas chambers in Auschwitz. But at the last moment, her mother thrust Agnes into the arms of another, pleading that it would be worth it if her child was to feel the love of another human being for even just one more day. The next day the camp was liberated – and Agnes has made it her life’s work to show that the purpose of such love, was to help her to break down human barriers.

It is through the love of others that the love of God works in us. And the purpose of love, as Agnes has rightly understood it, is to break down barriers. But sometimes, we get it the wrong way around and erect barriers. So the work of a Bishop is to break down the barriers to give life:

to ourselves,
to our people,
to our churches,
to our communities
and, supremely, to our world

This morning, Susan has symbolically broken down barriers by having our gospel read in the four languages in which the people of the Diocese of Virginia worship - Korean, Vietnamese, Spanish and English.

In this reading from John 20:19-23, we heard how Jesus transforms a group of frightened, confused disciples into a community of love in order to give life to those hindered by their own barriers. We learn that the barriers of fear disappear when we meet Jesus. And such is the experience of Susan whenever she goes to the Richmond jail to lead worship with the inmates there.

In an age of fear, we must be agents of hope. If you wish to understand another person, ask of what they are afraid – discover the fears that polarise and separate people. Martin Luther King articulated that kind of separation when he said: “Men often hate each other because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don’t know each other; they don’t know each other because they cannot communicate; they cannot communicate because they are separated.”

Sadly, it remains true that there can still be found a palpable divide between significant elements of the black and white communities, in my country and in yours. It is a sad legacy, bequeathed by the past but perpetuated by our own generation. Given the sensitivity still around issues of inclusion, probably the two most important symbols in today’s service are the young people’s choir from Shrine Mont camp and hearing Christopher Wilson and Lorin Johnson, eighth grade students from Anna Julia Cooper Episcopal School, read the words of Isaiah 42:1-9. How symbolic it was to hear them remind us of how the church is called to be a servant to the poor, the sick and the marginalised.

It is a favourite passage for Susan because of how Jesus used it to name the focus of his own calling as God’s servant, who is mandated to enact God’s transformative, healing and mending of the whole world: “I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations” - a magisterial phrase that suggests a particular vocation to enhance the life of the whole world – and not just the bits which suit our particular interests and prejudices.

Many centuries ago, Jewish sages had asked: “Who is a hero of heroes?” They answered: “Not one who defeats his enemy, but one who turns his enemy into a friend.” So the servant in Isaiah doesn’t bully but befriends - doesn’t shout but speaks softly. There is no harsh argument with those who are dismissive. The servant will not brush aside a person who is bruised or hurt, nor will the servant disregard the small and insignificant. There is no element of coercion in this approach – there is simply compassion. Turning passion into compassion is something that I sense is very much Susan’s own trademark. And - displaying loving passion as compassion is surely the hallmark of a Bishop.

Christian leadership requires the willingness to enter into a situation, with all the compassion and vulnerabilities a person has to share with fellow human beings. This is a painful and self-denying experience but, as Susan can testify, one that leads people out of their prisons of confusion and fear.

Indeed, (as Henri Nouwen points out) the paradox of Christian leadership is that the way out is the way in – and that only by entering into communion with human suffering can relief be found. (The Wounded Healer). As we heard in our Gospel today, the risen Christ was recognised by his wounds (20:20) and this detail takes us to the heart of the Christian understanding of God.

In the risen Christ, God comes to us – here, today - in words and sacrament. With the taking and receiving, comes also the promise of a strength beyond our own. And that promise, that strength comes as we do something else in this service, the action that is commanded by Jesus. It is to receive what is given in remembrance of him; in bread and wine to receive and take the crucified and risen Jesus into ourselves so that we may hold the mystery of his dying and living before the world.

Susan, you would not be human if you did not feel that all you can do is to hold out open and empty hands to God. He has brought you to this point. But, Susan, remember always that you are God's choice, the object of his divine delight and he gives you the strength you need. "He who calls is faithful." Today is another stage on your God-given journey, a journey that also encompasses Tom – and how lovely that our processional hymn today "Not here for high and holy things" was the same one that you and he processed in together, on your wedding day. It is, I know, a testament to your love of creation, of things common, of the creator and, as we heard in the last verse, of the justice God intends in creation.

We have sung those words in that hymn knowing how they reflect, so very authentically, a fundamental truth about YOU Susan: that "the love of Jesus" has "come and set thy soul ablaze to give and give, and give again, what God hath given thee; to spend thyself nor count the cost; to serve right gloriously the God who gave all worlds that are, and all that are to be."

Susan, continue on that faithful journey; it is all we ask or expect. Travel well, Susan and Tom, my friends, and may God speed you both.

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