

St Luke's in the City

Celebrating at the Crossroads

2nd Sunday in Advent, 9 December 2007

Dear Friends,

Yesterday we were honoured to participate in the ordination of James Edward McKenna as priest in the Church of God. Congratulations Father Jim! While Jim has been wrestling within himself over this unexpected transformation from permanent deacon to priest for some considerable time, yesterday's ordination required all of us. Bishop David asked Jim, "Do you believe that you are called to the office and work of a priest?" And then he asked all of us, "People of God, are you willing that Jim should be ordained priest?" "We are," we declared, "thanks be to God." Whilst it is true to say that the bishop ordains priests, it is also true that ordination is meaningless except in the context of the Body of Christ – just as eucharist is meaningless except as that action which both constitutes and promises the church. In other words, these are sacramental realities. And sacramental realities are by their very nature resistant to our customary rationalism and organisational logic. Attempts to 'explain' the nature of priesthood in reductive scientific terms flounder, in the same way that attempts to explain faith itself generally lead us into smaller, narrower and meaner spaces rather than into the expansiveness of the Divine Life. Regardless of prevailing politically-correct ideas about science and rationality, there is simply this other reality called faith in Christ which cannot be explained. Similarly, in spite of prevailing ideas about egalitarianism and democracy there is this reality called priest.

Current attempts to 'explain' the relationship between the priest and the rest of the baptised bog down in turgid rationalism, because such arguments skate along the institutional surface, and thus fail to grasp the deeper reality of the symbol. Whether we 'approve' rationally or not, the symbol of priest simply exists in the human soul, as it has done for millennia. Our affirmation to the bishop, consciously or otherwise, is our assent to this deep and tremendous reality – equally true for Jim and all of us. The individual who is called out to bear the external symbol recalls all of us to the reality of the universal inner priest - who is the Living Christ, the Incarnate Word, God with every one of us. That being so, though Jim's consent to God's call is required, in fact it's not about Jim. 'Your life,' wrote St Paul, 'is not your own.' Just so, the priesthood's call upon every human soul. Thus, we stand together on Tuesday night when the newly-ordained priest presides at eucharist for the first time, for the universal priest's principal task is to make eucharist - to take, to bless, to break, and to give our own lives, all of us, offered in the costly service of love.

With my love,
David