

Doctor of Desire and Servant of the Servants of God
Licensing of Tim Stead – Headington Quarry 3 September 2007

We've clearly chosen very well in getting Tim here. He brings wide experience. He used to work for American Express, so you'll have no financial problems. He used to work for Gatwick Airport – so, that's parish holidays sorted. And he's worked in tow other dioceses, so he can tell a new bishop how to run this one. But mainly he comes with the enthusiastic commendation of those who've worked with him before, and – we believe – he comes with the backing of the Holy Spirit. Trust me – I'm a bishop!

It's great to have Tim's ministry at Headington Quarry starting on this day, the feast day of Gregory the Great. Gregory was Bishop of Rome in the 6th Century, and one of the great teachers of the faith. I was particularly grateful for Gregory in 1997 when I went to Rome, as a member of the Canterbury Cathedral Chapter, to thank the Pope for Saint Augustine (or at least to thank him for the fact that his predecessor Gregory sent us Augustine, but the Pope does tend to have a corporate personality).

We had a private audience with the Pope (I do hope you don't mind this name dropping) and gave him a history of Canterbury Cathedral, which I'm sure he kept by his bedside. We talked and prayed together. I found it very moving. And of course, that Pope was the successor to Gregory, who in 597 sent Augustine with 40 uncertain monks to this spotty island off the coast of Europe. Augustine himself was pretty nervous and tried to turn back at France, but Gregory was having none of it.

There are two descriptions of Gregory the Great which I cherish; one made by himself and one made by others:

Firstly is the phrase 'Servant of the servants of God.' This was Gregory's description of himself as pope, and echoes Jesus' words to the disciples: 'the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...'

That's what a priest is. What Tim is, here, today. A servant of you, God's servants. There's no status in being a priest these days. As bishop, I wear a purple shirt, and as I go around Sainsbury's I imagine people thinking: 'That's a bit garish. And purple is so last year, isn't it?' And when in my last job I moved into the Bishop's House, the local kids began a campaign of stone throwing. Welcome to Gateshead.

The only status we have is that of a servant.

And our ministry is that of the towel. Not a fancy maniple, but a towel; and not a fluffy hotel towel, but a dirty towel that's been used for washing filthy feet. There's nothing glamorous about being a priest today.

Bishop Michael Marshall said that the priest's task is 'picking people up, loving them and letting them go.' That might sound a bit patronizing, but it's broadly true. The priest is a servant of the servants of God, living for them, empowering them and then releasing them to make a difference in the world. Because of course God isn't interested in collecting Christians into safe places; he's interested in us being the first fruits of a new creation, changing that little bit of the world where we have influence – be it an office, a family, a school, a network, whatever – changing it towards the life and values of the Kingdom. And every little bit matters; every one of us has an effect. I love the story of President John F Kennedy going to visit Cape Canaveral, and coming across a man holding a broom. 'And what is it you do?' asked the President. 'I'm helping to put a man on the moon,' came the answer. We're all in this together; we all make a difference.

And Tim is here to serve you, as you serve God's Kingdom.

The second description is that of 'doctor of desire.' That was how others described Gregory the Great. His spirituality was characterised by a deep desire for God, and that desire lies at the heart of every Christian's inner life, particularly that of a priest. If we lose the dynamic of desire, we lose the desire to be dynamic. We start to lost the plot.

When talking to a priest recently, I heard her say, 'I almost feel sick with longing for God.' Then she looked embarrassed, but that was the truth, and it's authentic truth. And this desire for God comes from realizing, extraordinarily, that we ourselves are desired by God. Nothing less. God desires our company more than anything else in the world. He loves us to bits. And many Christians tend to duck at this point. God as kindly disposed to us; God as a theoretical Father; God as generalised love – OK. But God as desiring us to belong to him – well, that's a bit much. Think of Lord Melbourne's famous quote: 'Things have got to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade the sphere of one's private life.'

But at the heart of the Christian life is desire, and at the heart of Tim's ministry here is desire. That desire is converted into action – as a servant – and into prayer.

There's a poem – doggerel really – that sums up quite well both the need to be a faithful servant of the servants of God, and to desire God above all other things.

Christopher C. is a jolly good sort,
He revels in every conceivable sport.
He governs a school with the highest of aims
To teach English boys to be 'Manly at Games.'
And feels (when his finer emotions are warm)
That he might get ordained, 'as a matter of form.'

Jeremy J. is a diligent priest
With a pastoral heart full of love for the least.
He comforts the anxious and visits the sick,
He buries the dead and he succours the quick.
For year after year in his parish he stays
And he prays and he prays and he prays and he prays.
Christopher C. like a gentleman true
Has married the niece of the Bishop of Q
Is whirled in a flash to a prominent perch
And given the charge of a priory church
(Although it must always be carefully shown
He attained to this height by merit alone).

Jeremy J. is a diligent priest
With a pastoral heart full of love for the least.
He comforts the anxious and visits the sick,
He buries the dead and he succours the quick.
For year after year in his parish he stays
And he prays and he prays and he prays and he prays.
Christopher C. we are proud to relate
Arrives at the archdiaconal state,
And hopes if he pulls the appropriate string
To gain the episcopal mitre and ring.
And who will begrudge to a gentleman true
The right to his honours, where honour is due.

Jeremy J. is a diligent priest
With a pastoral heart full of love for the least.
He comforts the anxious and visits the sick,
He buries the dead and he succours the quick.
For year after year in his parish he stays
And he prays and he prays and he prays and he prays.

Gregory would have approved of that, as the Doctor of Desire who was also the
Servant of the Servants of God.
His secret was this – and this needs to be Tim's secret too – that he prays and
he prays and he prays and he prays.