

I was just 22, tongue-tied, nervous,  
attending a selection conference to be a priest.  
I had a 40 minute interview  
with a newly consecrated bishop – the worst sort!  
Like Isaiah in the temple, I felt bogus to the core,  
‘Woe is me, I am lost, I am a man of unclean lips!’  
I had every sympathy for the elderly baron  
who’d had the nightmare  
that he was making a speech in the House of Lords  
only to wake up to find that he was.

I decided attack was the best form of defence.  
‘Bishop,’ I stuttered.  
‘Have you noticed any ontological change  
since your consecration?’

‘Goodness, I’ve never thought of that,’ he declared.

And then he waxed lyrical for the next 39 minutes  
about how inspired and energetic he felt.

I just sat there and smiled and nodded,  
until we were safely into injury time.

Ontological has come back to haunt me,  
because I believe with all my heart  
that when a priest is ordained,  
when the bishop lays hands on her or him,  
it effects a change to the root of their very being.

Just as a priest laying hands on the bread and wine  
effects a change to enable the ordinary stuff of life  
to carry the extraordinary life of God:  
his body broken, his blood shed.

All that ontological stuff may seem a bit fanciful,  
a fond thing vainly invented.

But ordination isn't about privilege  
being set on a pedestal.

It is about drinking the cup which Christ drank,  
aching with a wounded and broken world  
and bringing it home to Christ for ever.

Being ordained could be your death warrant,  
and in some parts of the world will be.

In 1982 we deacons had to submit an essay -  
reflective practice stuff –

before we could be priested,

At a training session,

the Archdeacon of York remonstrated with those

who had yet to hand their essays in.

‘No essay, no ordination,’ he decreed.

A lovely deaconess was present,

denied ordination in those days

for the heinous sin of being a woman.

With the darkest of smiles she asked

‘Archdeacon, if I hand in an essay, can I be priested?’

‘Madam, don’t wish yourself there too soon,’

the Archdeacon snapped,

‘The road to hell is paved with the skulls of priests.’

I shivered.

What is special about priesthood,

is that it is a rallying point

for what all Christians should be doing,

aching with the wounded

bringing broken hearts back home to Christ.

In my Meet the Bishop mornings

in Llandaff and St Alban's Cathedrals

I dress a boy and a girl as a priest,

and then with four additional items,

a ring, a cross, a crook, a hat,

turn them into a bishop.

I explain the robes,

how when you put them on you put on priesthood,

pausing for prayer.

We spend the most time with the first robe,

the alb: Latin for white.

I invite the kids

to come up with words which rhyme with white.

These are Year Sixes, so they were quite pure...

White: light.

Jesus is the light of the world,

the light which shines in the darkness,

which the darkness can never overcome.

We priests are not here to block the light

with our own stuff,

but to let Christ's light shine through.

Like Nicodemus in John's Gospel

we all come to Christ by night

and are met by light,

his tremendous light.

White: might.

We need to remember

when we grapple with darkness

that we have a divine steam train powering us,

sometimes behind us, sometimes before us.

To quote St Patrick:

‘I bind unto myself today

the power of God to hold and lead.

His eye to watch, his might to stay

his ear to hearken to my need.

The wisdom of my God to teach,

his hand to guide, his shield to ward.

The word of God to give me speech,

his heavenly host to be my guard.’

The might of God: the tiger in your tank.

White: sight.

Jesus opens eyes.

Priests need to open eyes

to see the wonder of the world,

to see the sorrows of the world,

to see God behind the world,

and, if they have very great faith,

to see God even behind his church.

White: bite, flight, kite...

All associated with a definite thrill, a definite punch.

Priests should enthuse about Christ,

the love of their life: madly, truly, deeply.

This is a serious business, so don't be shallow.

Never treat your parishioners as if they were



miscreants in a kindergarten,  
but rather as brilliant treasures  
to be enthused in Christ's service.

White: right.

Priests should be just and true.

No compromise, no deals.

We should do and say what is right before God,

whatever is true, whatever is noble,

whatever is **right**, whatever is pure,

whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable:

if anything is excellent or praiseworthy,

think about such things,

and do them.

OK, White: fight.

Fight the good fight,

Muscular Christianity!

But so often the campaign

becomes all consuming, addictive, bracing,

‘Take care when you fight with monsters

lest you too become a monster,’

Friedrich Nietzsche concluded.

Because we risk losing sight of the one who said:

Love your enemies.

Those who live by the sword

shall die by the sword,

Father forgive them.

*I would know*

*By whom and when the All-Earth-gladdening Law*

*Of peace, brought in by that Man Crucified,*

*Was ruled to be inept, and set aside?*

complains a dead soldier

mouldering in his Transvaal grave

in Thomas Hardy's *Christmas Ghost Story*.

White: fright, night...

representing all the terrors that surround us,

within and without.

Yet we are not alone,

although we go into some dire places

we never minister alone.

The Risen Christ always breaks in,

with his Peace be with you.

‘Behold I am with you always,  
each and every day until the end of the age.’

A priest tries with all her or his heart

to be Christ and to seek Christ

in the most unexpected of places.

Because there are no them and us, only us.

For fear of the Jews was a terrible reason

for the disciples to go for a lock-in.

After all, they were Jews, he was a Jew.

There is only us.

Neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free,

male or female, LGBT or straight:

all are one in Christ Jesus,

joint heirs with him,  
prompted by the same Spirit to cry, 'Abba, Father,'  
aching to find their rest in Him.

Grace comes from some surprising directions  
and is always met by grace.

Back to my 3 day selection conference in 1977.

Whilst the interviews were going on  
we were divided into two unsupervised groups,  
supposed to discuss important questions  
on church affairs and report back at the final plenary.

Our group of nine sat in comfy chairs  
in the drawing room, not sure how to start.

I, the youngest by a decade,

rummaged in some cupboards  
and found a set of carpet boules.  
‘Let’s play a game  
and then see if we can think of anything!’  
But the thing is,  
we ended up playing boules  
for all the sessions,  
until late into the final night  
we realised we hadn’t got anything  
to bring back to the plenary the next morning.  
‘You’re studying at Cambridge,  
you think of something,’ the group decreed.  
  
I duly did, and reported back to the plenary.  
I even invented a robust exchange of views,

when our only robust exchange

was about whose boule was nearest the jack.

The other group had discussed the important questions

earnestly, late into every night

but had come to no conclusions,

so had nothing to report.

The funny thing is our group were all recommended.

The other group weren't.

And I often think about that.

We all need to get over ourselves

and our so important agendas,

and be a bit playful,

wisdom playing at the feet of God,

her daddy.

Before I was confirmed at the age of eleven  
by the Archbishop of York,  
I was taught the Catechism for 16 long boring weeks.  
My dad, the vicar, could have been talking Klingon  
for all it meant to me.

When I took confirmation classes in Middlesbrough,  
I just played with the kids.

We once had an improvised Eucharist  
with baked flat bread, a little red wine  
underneath our kitchen table,  
fourteen youngsters, Rachel and me,  
pretending we were in the Catacombs.

Safeguarding would have had a fit!  
I don't recall much of the catechism;  
but I bet those kids remember the catacombs.



Priests:

called to play before God,

to play Christ before God,

to play hide and seek with Christ in his world.

On the subject of Klingon,

when I was confirmed

the best thing by far on TV was Star Trek,

the original series

with Capt James T Kirk and Mr Spock.

Science fiction, philosophy,

space – the final frontier,

faith, love stories.

All boldly going

where no man has gone before,

but always strictly adhering

to Church of England guidelines

on same-alien relationships:

brilliant!

In the 1994 film, *Generations* 8/8

James T Kirk dies

with these epic words on his lips.

‘We made a difference. It was fun. O my!’

Knowing the strange ways of God,

when my life and ministry come to an end,

I guess I will be beamed up to give account

to my selection-conference bishop of yesteryear.

Still very nervous and tongue-tied,

I will make Capt Kirk’s dying words my own epitaph:

‘We made a difference. It was fun. O my!’