

**Sermon for ordination as bishop of Anne Hollinghurst, Ric Thorpe and Ruth Worsley  
St Paul's Cathedral, 28 September 2015.**

*'You will see heaven opened and the angels of ascending and descending on the Son of Man'. (John 1. 51)*

One of my grandmas used to call me a duck. Affectionately, that is. It was always, 'Oh, Stephen, be a duck, make me a cup of tea', or, 'Stephen, be a duck, get me the newspaper'. But my other Grandma called me an angel: 'Stephen, be an angel, run up the shops for me... be an angel, put the kettle on'.

I'm not sure about being a duck, but I think being an angel, especially today, and especially for new bishops, is very good advice indeed. For angels are messengers. And angels are those who watch and guard. And guardian angels are those who care for those they love and who are put in their charge. So let us think about the work and office of a bishop in these three ways – messenger, sentinel, pastor.

Earlier this year I did that thing that many bishops do; I put up a marquee in the garden and invited shed loads of people round for lunch day after day. One group were the retired clergy of the diocese. It is a way of saying thank you. Without them the Church of England would easily fall apart. Some of them arrived early. Very early. Too early. I looked out of my window at about ten-o'clock and found several wandering round the garden. One passed on greetings from someone who had known me when I was a teenager. I vaguely remembered the people he was referring to. He said that they had expressed surprise when they heard I had become a bishop. 'Oh did they', I replied. 'Yes', he continued. 'They said you must have changed a lot. (Well, thank you for that vote of confidence!)'.

And yes, I suppose, I have changed a lot. But not in the way that phrase is usually used. I think I have become more myself. I think the Holy Spirit is changing me into the person I am meant to be. And for me being a priest and now a bishop is part of that. This ministry I have been called to is not something I put on in the morning and take off at night, it is a sacramental identity, part of what it means for me to be baptised, to be a follower of Jesus. And one of the first responsibilities of a bishop is to be an angel, a messenger, an evangelist, the one who endlessly and constantly tells the story of what God has done in Christ. And although I don't much like the soundbite culture we live in, if you pushed me into a corner after the service and demanded one from me, I think I would say that for our culture at this particular time, it is that in Christ you can become yourself. You can be set free from the snares and temptations of a world that tells you you aren't good enough, good looking enough, thin enough, clever enough, young enough, and find a new identity and become completely yourself as you are meant to be in the communion with God that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ makes possible. As teacher and evangelist this is the first job of the bishop. Not MD of CofE plc; not safe pair of managerial hands, not just emerged slick and shiny from the talent pool, not even graduate of the latest whizzy business school offer

of better organised salvation (though these things can help us), but storyteller, poet, theologian: a gospel person, with the good news of Christ and on our lips and in our hearts, and this good news translated into the languages of the smorgasbord of cultures in which we serve. Which is also why being a bishop is so dangerous. We either draw back from such an uncomfortable proclamation. Or end up holding back the Spirit's sure advance into all truth. Meanwhile, too many people still treat us with the wrong sort of deference and respect, and believing our own publicity, we collude.

Attempting to describe to his clergy what sort of ministers we need to be, and how we might see what this gospel says to the people we serve, that great teacher of the faith, Gregory the Great, drew on that strong, but oft neglected biblical theme, of God's minister as sentinel. He said this -

"A sentinel always selects a high vantage point in order to be able to observe things better. In the same way, whoever is appointed as a sentinel for a people should live on the heights so that he can help his people by having a broad perspective."

This seems to me to be hugely significant for our ministry today. What are we looking at? Where do we go? To whom do we speak? What is our perspective? What demands attention? And what is it we choose to ignore? Are we just going to be a church for those gathered in; or once again a church for all the world? But Gregory goes on, reflecting painfully on his own fallings as a minister –

"I find it hard to make such a statement because such words are a reproach to myself. My preaching is mediocre, and my life does not cohere with the values I preach so inadequately. I do not deny that I am guilty, for I recognise in myself lethargy and negligence."

It is this honesty, humility and aspiration that we need more than anything if we are to be leaders in the church of Christ. For to be a sentinel – a contemplative watchman for the Lord is, to quote Sr. Isabel Mary SLG 'hard, combative and boring'; it is not to detach yourself from the world, but to stand on the heights and survey the world in all its joys and horrors, interpreting the world to the church and the church to the world, warning of danger when everyone is feeling safe, and proclaiming the victory of Christ when everything looks and feels defeated.

But Gregory's wisdom does not permit him to wallow in his own shortcomings, and nor must we. After all if this were the case the three of you being ordained bishop today would run screaming from the cathedral agreeing that some terrible mistake had been made as soon as the Archbishop uttered the words –

"Remember always with thanksgiving that God has entrusted to your care Christ's beloved bride, his own flock, bought by the shedding of his blood in the cross."

None of us are equal to this task. None of us are up to this in our own strength and with our own resources. That is why the declaration continues, 'pray for the grace and power of God... pray you may be more and more conformed to the image of Christ.' And Gregory ends his sermon by saying "Perhaps my very awareness of my feelings will gain me pardon from a sympathetic judge.

Brothers and sisters, God has appointed a judge. It is the Lord Jesus Christ; and he is all mercy and forgiveness for those who turn to him in penitence and faith all too clear that they are not what they are meant to be, that they, like all of us, are being changed, and not yet the finished thing.

Which leads me to my last point, the bishop as pastor. The bishop as the vicar for the vicars. The bishop as the one who loves and cares and understands his people, and who knows herself well enough to build a team where the gifts and abilities he or she does not possess are lived out in the body of the church; for ministry belongs to the whole people of God, and our task is to order and commission and ordain those who are called to live this out in certain ways, and for the whole church to be recalled to its primary vocation which is to know and love God, and let that knowledge and love overflow in service to the world. Let me quote Gregory one last time –

"What kind of sentinel – and we might add what kind of pastor, what kind of evangelist – am I? I do not stand on the pinnacle of achievement; I languish in the pit of my frailty. And although I am unworthy, the creator and redeemer of us all has given me grace to see life whole and an ability to speak effectively of it".

If you are wondering why you are being made a bishop today; if people who knew you in the past have raised an eyebrow and expressed surprise at your appointment, then perhaps it is for this: God has given you and will go on giving you the grace to see life whole and an ability to speak effectively of it.

So – a new line for the litany - Good Lord deliver us from successful bishops, from too well prepared or even too well organised bishops, from ready answer in the back pocket and PowerPoint strategy self-sufficient, all efficient bishops. Take us to those high places, places of perspective and reality, where we and all our schemes are set on fire, which, paradoxically for us, are also those places where life is raw, and pain and darkness requisite. Take us to the heights of prayer, to the depths of the scriptures, to the bottom step before the altar, to a places of silent waiting where, with mitres off and staffs laid down, we will be replenished and know our need of God, and there be renewed and strengthened for the things that lie ahead as bishops of God's church – messengers, sentinels and pastors.

I think it was to Austin Farrar that someone once expressed surprise that God made angels. With typical insightfulness, Farrar replied that he was surprised that God made anything else. So Anne, Ric, Ruth be an angel. Aspire to that life of transparent holiness, watchful before God and overflowing with the love of Christ. This is not the time to change. This is

the time to be yourself. The Church has recognised in you a gift and a calling. Go on being you, and becoming you, finding the way of being a bishop that is your way, and let God do his stuff in you and through you. For as Jacob discovered in the desert a gateway to heaven and angels ascending and descending; and as Jesus himself became this place of encounter between heaven and earth, so his church, his body, his ministers today, each of you, proclaim the same joyful dispensation of love.

Sing choirs of angels. Sing in exultation.

Sing all ye citizens of heaven above.

Glory to God in the highest. Peace to his people on earth.