

“WITH A MERRY HEART”

A Testimony to a joyful life – by the Rev’d David Gregg

Part 4: Assistant Curate, Scholar-Parson

Assistant Curate: (I was ordained Deacon at Michaelmas 1968 to serve as Assistant Curate in St. Mark’s Church, Barrow-in-Furness, designated by the Church Urban Fund as the most deprived urban parish in the Diocese of Carlisle!)

Our ordination retreat was held at Rydal Hall in the heart of the Lake District, close by where William Wordsworth used to live. We were highly amused by the calendar of events on the notice board. It read:

September 26th – 28th. Ordination Retreat

September 30th – Closed for Repairs

“Scoobydoo” – “a 1000 letter name for an artificial protein”. – “soap”. Just some of the suggestions thrown at me when I challenged the Youth group at St Mark’s to come up with anything they could think of that didn’t have a spiritual dimension. Being responsible for the “Yoof” was a major getting-thrown-in-at-the-deep-end aspect of being a curate, which called for a new idea each week. I soon disposed of soap, since cleansing is a prominent theme of the Scriptures. And we had an interesting discussion about the protein, and what the relationship is between any reality and the label we stick on it, particularly when it comes to spiritual things. Scoobydoo was a bit trickier, but I referred them to the opening sentence of the stories of Brer Rabbit, where it is asserted that, before human beings appeared, the animals lived in houses and wore clothes and chatted among themselves. So we talked about the morality of anthropomorphisms, that is attributing human form or personality to animals (or to God?). Balaam’s ass (Numbers 22) seemed a case in point, and I think I just about got away with it. (At St. Matthew’s tide 1969 I was ordained Presbyter by Sidney Cyril Bulley, Bishop of Carlisle.)

It has been a source of enormous joy for so much of my life to have been a deacon and a presbyter in the Church of God. I was once asked to give a talk to the Aylesbury Deanery Synod on whether we need a full-time stipendiary ministry, and I gave three reasons why I thought we did. The first was to maintain the Apostolicity of the Church, that is to say to ensure that we continue in the teaching and practice of the Apostles. Our bishops are primarily responsible for this, but we do need a trained local network appointed and ordained by them to keep the Church on a scriptural path.

The second reason I gave was to ensure the Availability of Christian ministry at all hours of the day and night and every day of the year. (If ordained clergy are away at any time, or need a regular “rest day” – as they do! – they generally have very good systems to ensure that someone is available in their absence. “Retired” clergy are quite useful for this!)

The third reason, I suggested, was Acceptability. If the church is meant to be, primarily, the focus, at the heart of the parish community, for God’s Own mission and ministry to all, it is very important that there is someone whom everyone can recognize and trust as a focus for that task. That is where the word “parson” comes in, a person (Latin = persona) who is approachable and open and acceptable, as such. It is the distinctive role of the Church of England, in our society, not only to offer ministry to the “saints” (i.e. those who are professed and practising members of the local church), but also to be a channel of God’s grace to all who seek His help and blessing.

Moses and Joshua, David and Solomon, Elijah and Elisha, Paul and Timothy – the Bible is full of examples of the importance of apprenticeship, of learning by doing, under the tutelage of a capable teacher. Jesus chose twelve to be His disciples, and that is the model to which we are all called, for the most important apprenticeship of our lives – to walk in His footsteps, to do His work, in His way, to follow His example and His teaching and, in fact, to become like Him in every way. As I have said, I will always be thankful for my time as Uncle Neil’s Assistant Curate, but the time had come for me to move on, to a pastoral charge of my own. But I am still learning and growing as a disciple of the Lord Jesus, as I trust I shall be to the end of my days.

Scholar-Parson: Towards the end of my curacy at St. Mark's I was very unsure whether I should continue in pastoral and parish work, which I had really come to love, or seek an academic post, doing teaching and research. The Arch-deacon and the Bishop between them solved the dilemma, by creating a post especially for me. The benefice of Lindal-in-Furness (an ex iron-ore mining village) was suspended for five years, and I was invited to go there as curate-in-charge. I was commissioned to take Sunday services and do two days a week of pastoral care. One day was a 'rest day' and the other three was to do research. I began work on a London University M. Phil degree, studying the Hebrew and Semitic background to the idea of remembering, memorial and commemoration, especially concerning Jesus' command, "Do this in commemoration of Me." We all found it the happiest time of our lives thus far, and I still think of it very fondly indeed.

In my studies at Lindal, I tried to explore what Jesus meant, when He attached the phrase, "As often as you drink it" to the sharing of the communion cup. I later wrote ("Anamnesis in the Eucharist" p. 16):

"... by the addition of this ... phrase, Jesus ensured that the Sacrament He was instituting would be repeated at each ... weekly meal of the fellowship of His disciples ... If Jesus had intended a private daily communion He would have attached the rubric (i.e. the command to commemorate Him) to the bread alone. If He had intended an annual anniversary memorial banquet, He would presumably have attached it to the Passover lamb. The fact that He attached it to the actions with the bread and the wine, and carefully underlined the use of the Cup of Blessing as the 'time-factor' provides an essential ... clue. (i.e. that He was commanding His friends to hold a weekly commemorative meal.)

This certainly became the practice of the early church, and, it is my sincere belief that all of us who claim to be Christ's disciples should do all we can to attend a weekly communion service, to mark ourselves out as those who truly understand the importance and blessing of the Sabbath.

As well as my academic studies there was always the pastoral side of being a country parson. King George Vth was once told that attendance figures in the Church of England were falling. He said, "Nonsense! Every service that I go to, the church is packed to the doors!" This came to mind when a very quiet and loving lady told me that she was thinking of standing down from the Lindal Parochial Church Council (P.C.C.) because she virtually never said anything. Mindful of what a constraint she was on the more voluble and "straight-talking" northern folk who made up the bulk of the P.C.C., and how much better the meetings were with her calming presence, I said, "Please don't do that, Gladys. You've no idea what it's like when you are not there!"

Mind you, straight-talking can be a bit revealing at times. I was puzzled, for instance, as to why my plans to remove some rows of pews at the back of St. Peter's, to create a space where people could stand and talk at the end of the services, instead of being hastily funnelled out into the rain, was meeting some stubborn but unexplained resistance. When I asked the P.C.C. directly, I was bluntly informed that the rows that I was proposing to remove included the traditional churchwardens' pew! I immediately modified my plans, and it went through on the nod.

When the time came for me to be praying about where the LORD wanted us to go next, I spent several months of searching. I explored lectureships at Oak Hill and St. John's, Nottingham, a chaplaincy at the North London Polytechnic, and one or two other possibilities, but none of them proved right. In February 1975, Uncle Alan suggested that we should fast together for a day, at the end of which we came together to pray. Uncle Alan was given a picture/vision of me standing on a watchtower, with a river flowing by under a bridge. We felt that this was the LORD saying that a period of some time must elapse, but that eventually I would be given a post of some prominence and conspicuous opportunity. We waited patiently, and seven months later, I was appointed to be Information Secretary of the Board for Mission and Unity of the General Synod of the Church of England (- how's that for a mouthful.) We were off to London.

(To be continued)