

***Sermon preached by The Revd Canon Julia Wilkinson
at the Ordination of Priests at Truro Cathedral
on Sunday 4 July 2010 10.30am***

Well, things change – life changes in one of those DVD Mail order catalogues that plopped through my letterbox the other day – I saw that you can now get all 26 episodes of the 1967 TV series *The Forsyte Saga* on just 7 DVDs and what's more, it's half price! Of course, when it was first broadcast there was no Free-view Plus, video, whatever – you had to be there, to see it live! And it went out early on Sunday evening. 18 million watched it. So many that in churches all over the realm attendance at evensong slumped, some churches moved that service and others just cancelled, never to recover it.

Maybe its draw was nostalgia – a belief in a mythical late Victorian/Edwardian era; a golden age that never existed (or it may have been Eric Porter and Suzanne Hampshire – the star studded cast) but its well documented that the *Forsyte Saga* led to the demise of Parish evensong.

The Archbishop of Canterbury at the time was Michael Ramsay and there is a story about him – he told against himself – this may be apocryphal. Anyway, it goes like this:

He was very tired and a weekend suddenly became free. A friend lent him a cottage in Dorset. Well, it was cold and wet so he hibernated, but on Sunday evening he heard the bell toll for Evensong (obviously not changed by the *Forsyte Saga*). He thought he ought to go, grabbed his Mac from the back door and tottered across. Looking at best bedraggled, wild and woolly, he opened the church door,. There was the vicar, warden, organist, two others and a dog. They nodded and he sat at the back in the shadows. They did the lot; responses, psalms, sermon, hymns. At the end the vicar went up to the stranger (whom he didn't recognise) and said that it was lovely to see him and was so sorry that so few people were there. He used the normal explanations; it was cold, wet, dark, illness etc. Michael Ramsay replied that he quite understood as he was a parish priest himself once. Still not recognising his scruffy visitor, the vicar said "Oh, my dear chap, I'm so sorry. Was it the drink that did it?" The story goes that he was forgiven his mistake, but Michael Ramsay was a Parish Priest if only briefly and he wrote a book called "*The Christian Priest today*" – a classic. It's a collection of his talks given to priests on their ordination retreat and he goes through the ordinal those promises you are to make. Now he wrote it in 1972. Some say it's dated, but I would disagree. As Martyn Percy, the present Principal of Cuddesdon

Theological College (where Ramsay himself trained) said when talking to a group of us a few weeks ago: “Every generation has lived in Modern times” - Never forget it. We all live in our own time.

You are being priested today, now, into the times in which we live – times which are a challenge as they always have been. There never has been a golden age. The Forstye Saga theme tune was taken from Eric Coates’ *Halcyon Days* and Galsworthy’s fictional drama was just that – fiction. Into which people wanted to escape in 1967.

Read church history – Read the diaries of parish priests and learn about their ups and downs like Woodford and Kilvert, who wrote of meeting the Vicar of Fordington, Dorset where in 1874 16 women walked out as he didn’t pay them and there was no water in the font for baptism – the last vicar had spat in his hand.

The next parish to me, up on the North Coast is St Ervan, made famous by John Betjeman in his poem *Summoned by Bells*.

“I found St Ervan’s partly ruined church.
Its bearded Rector, holding in one hand
A gong-stick, in the other hand a book,
Struck, while he read, a heavy-sounding bell,
Hung from an elm bough by the churchyard gate,
‘Better come in. It’s time for Evensong.’
There wasn’t much to see, there wasn’t much
The *Little Guide* could say about the church.
Holy and small and heavily restored,
It held me for the length of evensong,
Said rapidly among discoloured walls,
Impatient of my diffident response.
‘Better come in and have a cup of tea.’
The Rectory was large, uncarpeted;
Books and oil-lamps and papers were about;
The study’s pale green walls were mapped with damp;
The pitch-pine doors and window-frames were cracked;
Loose noisy tiles along the passages
Led to a waste of barely furnished rooms:
Clearly the Rector lived here all alone.
He talked of poetry and Cornish saints;

He kept an apiary and a cow;
He asked me which church service I like best-
I told him Evensong.”

That vicar was called Preb Johnson (1917) and is remembered with great affection, but if you read extracts of his letters in Moira Tangye’s history of 19th/20th Century St Ervan. It emerges that he had a huge struggle to start with, with the Parish Council and especially the school mistress Miss Drake stopping him coming into the school. The only thing missing is Kate Aidie in a flak jacket doing a war report. But, over time he succeeded to reconcile his parishes, to bring them together, to heal their wounds and divisions by love, prayer and reconciliation. The community moved on, things changed, they left the past behind and healed.

The last part of the gospel today is indeed part of the charge about reconciliation:

“If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them.
If you retain the sins of any they are retained.”

Very scary! But Michael Ramsay in that book *The Christian Priest Today* talks about this reading, the priestly role of confession and repentance. He points out that repentance means to him, turn towards God ἐπιδραφῆν in Greek and to change the Mind, ΠΕΤΖΥΟΕΙΥ . To change. Today for you is a time of change, and as priests in today’s world we are called to be agents of reconciliation, agents of the means of change. We have to be open to our own change and to be changed to grow.

In that early Sunday evening BBC slot there is now the programme Country File and the other Sunday I heard a Northumberland farmer describing the Co-op that he and his neighbours had formed to survive. Alone they would have gone under but together their farms became a thriving concern.

There is an African saying, which Al Gore once quoted:

“If you want to travel quickly go alone
If you want to travel far go together”

As priests it’s your task to help people travel together, work together. As priests, we are agents of change. We are followers of Christ who turned everything upside down – challenged the world to change.

I trained at Lincoln Theological College where Michael Ramsay was for a short time as Sub Warden and in the Ramsay Room (where he was supposed to have put together the Christina Priest Today, on sabbatical, our Warden (Bill Jacob) gave us this piece of ancient wisdom before we were sent out to our curacies. It's by Lao Tsue a piece of 6th Century BC Toasim:

“Go to the people
Live with them
Learn from them
Start with what they know
Build with what they have
But of all the best leaders
When the job's done, when
The task is accomplished, the
People will say
We have done it ourselves.”

Exciting stuff! There always has been change. Tradition is organic. It changes and we are part of that process. Archdeacon Clive told curates some years ago “Love God, Love the people. Love the place” Love in Greek is $\zeta\upsilon\zeta\pi\epsilon$ which translates as to have generous concern for, generosity, value, to value everyone. It's not about begin lovey-dovey Charlie's Angels stuff , it's about having a generous concern for and that often involves change and challenge.

As I told you on retreat, when I was a bushy-tailed very new vicar I lived and worked on an estate that the Bishop called a “challenge”. I knew I'd made it when they broke all the windows in the street and didn't just target the vicarage. Bishop Dominic Walker, now Bishop of Monmouth then Bishop of Reading got those of use in UPA together and told us about a phrase that bishops, by tradition, had in their ring. To cut a long story short I emailed him for it and this is his reply:

“Omnes Amandi’ (to love them all) and I know the Bishop of Guildford and others have it on their rings. It comes from a quote from St. Augustine of Hippo on the role of a bishop which is roughly translated:

‘To correct the troublesome; to cheer the faint-hearted; to support the weak; to refute those who oppose the gospel; to guard against enemies; to teach the unlearned; to stir up the lazy; to quiet the argumentative; to put the proud in their place; to assist the desperate; to reconcile the quarrelsome; to help the needy, to

liberate the oppressed; to encourage the good; to tolerate the bad and - to love them all!

I guess that's also not a bad description of priestly life."

Not wishy-washy stuff – it's a tough command for the Christian Priest today. We are living in challenging times as priests have before us – but together, together as Christian communities we can not only survive, but spread the Gospel, Christ's revolutionary life-changing gospel of love, justice, of peace, reconciliation, caring for the weak, speaking out for those who have no voice, to challenge injustice and poverty."

We are agents of change, but not on our own, working together, looking at new fresh ways, we can grow the church and together discover God's Kingdom. We are charged, each of us, to spread Christ's gospel, to change a world where a few have so much and many have little you are to be ordained in a few moments to be Christian Priests today. So remember: Omnes Amandi – To love them all.