

Ordination Service Sermon

Martyn Snow, Bishop of Leicester - Sunday 29 June

For me, it was 35 years ago. I remember it well - the nerves and feeling of near panic in the hours leading up to it. Would I get my words right? Would I remember what I'd been told in the rehearsal? Would I trip over and relive that recurring nightmare about falling over in front of hundreds of laughing people, all with their phones out, ready to upload to social media? And what would my family and friends make of it all?

I'm talking of course about my wedding, 35 years ago this summer (and yes, I was very young when I got married). Thankfully the wedding service went off without a hitch, although the story of what happened at the reception will have to wait for another day.

But I could just as easily be talking about my ordination - almost exactly 30 years ago for me (I was still very young when I was ordained). Even more concerned about tripping over the strange dress I had to wear; even more concerned about whether I would stand / sit at right time; get my words right (although a word to the candidates - you only have to read them off a sheet), and everyone else around me seemed so much more confident, self-assured. It was quite terrifying.

This service is a big deal for Sneha, Mike, Ralph, & Josh, one they have been thinking about for years, - in some cases they've spent one year in interview or vocations process, three years at college, and now the moment it has all been leading up to.

So, a good moment to ask 'why?' Why are these four hugely talented, wise people being ordained today. Well, there are many layers of meaning to ordination and each candidate has their own story. But today's Bible reading gives us central reason - behind everything else is the question Jesus asked: "who do you say I am?" When I first answered that question for myself - not theoretically but deeply personally, I knew my life could never be the same.

Let's unpack that a bit.

Do you know where the word "panic" comes from? The Greek god "Pan" (half man, half goat) was the god of terror or fear. And Caesarea Philippi was the site of worship of Pan – a significant context for this story. Jesus didn't ask his question anywhere - it wasn't a random choice - he choose this place, the site of worship of the god of fear and terror to ask: "who do you say I am?" The context for today's ordination is a world in fear - a world in turmoil, real terror for many. Even after yesterday's ordination service, I spoke with an Iranian woman who was visiting the Cathedral. "Pray for my country," she repeated to me - over and over again, visibly upset. So, this place - the site of the worship of Pan, the god of terror, this is the place. Jesus chose to ask his friends "who do you say I am?".

What is the answer? They might have given many different answers - just as today. An interesting historical figure; a good teacher; a good storyteller; maybe even a prophet. But Peter says something extraordinary: "You are the Messiah." - A big deal for Jew at that time. Messiah means "one who has been anointed" i.e. a king who brings peace in a world of fear. This is why Jesus is keen that they don't tell anyone at this stage - to be proclaimed king was an act of direct rebellion, treason - an affront to the powers of the day.

We know he launched a revolution - but a very different kind to the civil wars raging in various countries around the world today. A quiet revolution where individuals and communities are changed in their view of the world, their sense of purpose in life, and their willingness to make sacrifices in order that others may come to know this king.

For me, the adventure of following Jesus as an ordained deacon, priest - led me to Africa. It was a time of civil war in Sierra Leone and Liberia, with refugees in Guinea. Few things in my life have been more terrifying than a 12-year-old boy at a roadblock with an AK47. I was told to get out of the car and led at gunpoint to the army office. Yet a deep peace came over me. There was no point getting angry or showing my frustration. Nothing to be gained by challenging the young boy. I knew I had to stay calm and simply insist that there was nothing to be gained by detaining me or my colleagues. This is what it means to say Jesus is anointed one, king of another kingdom. It doesn't mean we will never be hurt or suffer pain or anguish, but it does mean we can know a peace which passes all understanding and find meaning in this world of terror.

So to Mike, Ralph, Sneha and Josh, I rejoice that you have experienced this peace for yourself, that you have encountered the king, the anointed one, and you are now taking your place among the hundreds of generations who have followed in Peter's footsteps - declaring Jesus to be king and offering your lives in service of him.

I pray that you may be those who help others to find meaning and peace in this confusing and - at times - frightening world.