

THE LIVING REMINDER

Addresses given at the Ely Ordination Retreat 2005

Peter Sills



INTRODUCTION

I've taken the theme for this retreat from one of Henri Nouwen's books, *The Living Reminder* (1977), three lectures about the spiritual resources of ministers. What is it, asked Nouwen, that enables them to preach, teach, counsel and celebrate with a continuing sense of joy, wonder, gratitude and praise?

His answer is to picture the minister as a 'living reminder', one whose life points to God and who heals, sustains and guides the people of God. At the end of the book he recalls how he realised that he had, in fact, discussed the minister using the familiar threefold pattern of pastor, priest and prophet. Over these few days together I'm going to reflect on what it means to be a pastor, priest and prophet in today's world, and I'm going to explore this using the symbols that we use in our ministry, the ordinary things of life that we endow with special significance and which become effective signs of the grace of God.

The Retreat begins with a *Son et Lumière* presentation in the Cathedral which explores the way the natural world points to God, the way the material points to the divine. (These presentations are one of the ways we seek at the Cathedral to reach out to those on the fringe and beyond.) The four Addresses will develop some of the themes of the *Son et Lumière* reflecting on water, touch, bread and wine, and light, and the two reflections at the Eucharist will focus on the two words 'living' and 'reminder'. The time of Guided Prayer at the end will bring together the themes of the addresses and will include an opportunity for penitence and anointing.

On Saturday you will make holy promises to God and commit yourselves to a new way of life – especially for the Deacons, but for the Priests also. Before Jesus began his ministry he took time to reflect on what this would mean for him, and at other times also he took himself off to be alone with God. A Living Reminder points to Jesus, and so we seek to model our lives on him, including taking time to be alone with God as he did.

During the retreat I will be available if you want to talk and pray with you privately and to offer personal ministry.

You've probably brought something to read; that's fine, but remember that this is a time to rest, to listen and to receive; its not a time to study!

Its also a time for self-examination. The opportunity to make a confession and to receive the assurance of forgiveness can be a great and strengthening gift – I'll lead you in this in whatever way you find helpful.

A word about me. I was ordained in 1981 in the Diocese of Southwark, where I served all my ministry before coming to Ely Cathedral in 2000. Before ordination I taught Law – I am a barrister – at what is now Kingston University. My parish life was in the London suburbs. My formation has been through the catholic tradition, but I have also learnt a lot from my evangelical colleagues, particularly about personal commitment to Christ. I have a particular interest in the Benedictine tradition and the way it can help people connect their faith and their work.

I can only share what has been true for me, and I hope you will find it helpful. One of those things is Henri Nouwen's image of the minister as a living reminder: that speaks to me. When I was a Deacon someone said something to me – I forget her exact words – which made me realise the difference that ordination had made. She felt that by telling me something somehow she had also told God. Thinking about it afterwards I realised that I had become a representative person whose life is lived on behalf of others; a living reminder there to keep the rumour of God alive!

Finally a word about silence. The silences are the heart of the retreat. For some of you observing considerable periods of silence will be a new experience. Try not to resist it; look on it as a positive thing. It was alone in the desert that Elijah heard the still small voice. Silence is where we

enter that place and hear that voice. Like Elijah, God has a word for each of us, and for each of us alone. Do your best to resist the temptation to talk – there are times when we can; resist the temptation to sneak out and watch TV, or to phone friends or family, or send a text. For these few days we’re trying to stay on God’s wavelength.

One way of using the silence is *Lectio divina*, or sacred reading. It’s the way of prayer St Benedict taught his monks and its sometimes called St Benedict’s method. It is described on a separate paper, together with some prayers that you might find helpful.

Pray for each other, and pray for me as I will for you.

USING THE SILENCE - *LECTIO DIVINA*

Each address begins with a text; use that, perhaps looking up the whole passage in your Bible.

Meditation in this method is done with the mouth, speaking quietly to yourself – or to God, rather than with the mind. There are four stages:

1. **Read** the passage slowly, speaking the words quietly to yourself. Stop when a word or phrase speaks to you.
2. **Repeat** the word, or phrase, or part of the phrase, like savouring a sweet, or striking a bell and listening to the echoes. Keep doing this until the process reaches a natural conclusion.
3. **Respond** with a brief prayer to what the passage says to you.
4. **Rest** in quiet holding the experience in your heart.

SOME PRAYERS

A Prayer from Malling Abbey

be silent
still
aware
for there
in your own heart
the Spirit is at prayer
listen and learn
open and find
heart-wisdom
Christ

A Prayer of St Augustine

O Love,
who ever burnest
and never consumest;
O my God,
kindle me.

A Prayer of Brother Roger

O Christ,
tirelessly you seek out
those who are looking for you
and who think you are far away;
teach us at every moment,
to place our spirit in your hands.
While we are still looking for you,
already you have found us.
No matter how poor our prayer is,
you listen to us far beyond
what we can imagine and believe.

An Invocation of the Trinity - Richard Harries

O God, Father,
moment by moment you hold me in being,
on you I depend.

O God, eternal Son,
friend and brother beside me,
in you I trust.

O God, Holy Spirit,
life and love within me,
from you I live.

WATER

Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. John testified: 'I saw the Spirit come down from heaven like a dove and come to rest on him... I have seen it and have borne witness: this is God's chosen One.'

MARK 1.9; JOHN 1.32 - 3.4

Water is the single most essential thing in life. In this country water is still relatively plentiful, but our consumption of it rises continually and global warming will decrease its supply. There is nothing like scarcity to make us realise the value of something we're inclined to take for granted. Water has always been scarce in the Middle East, and its value properly appreciated. We see this on the news with pictures of drought from Africa, and the daily search for water – in effect the daily search for life. Something that is so basic to life is profoundly symbolic, and it's not surprising that the Church uses water as the sign of new life in Christ.

We reflected last night on water as a sign of both life and death. It's a powerful symbol. Perhaps like me you have sat by the sea watching the waves ceaselessly breaking on the rocks. The rocks are hard, but the water will wear them away; in the end nothing can withstand it. We saw that tragically when the tsunami overwhelmed the coastlands of the Indian Ocean. I remember too, in the summer before I was ordained, sitting in a rowing boat in the middle of a fjord in Norway very aware of the immense depth below me, and some years later watching the Victoria falls in Zimbabwe spellbound by the spectacle.

These experiences were wonderful, but they were also awesome and scary. Perhaps that is why water is the outward sign of the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit brings comfort and strength, but the Spirit is also irresistible like the tide, and takes us where we would not go. Baptism is in Holy Spirit, and as we pour water over the new Christian so God cleanses and renews them and pours upon them his gifts that they may

be his witnesses. The baptism of Jesus is also our baptism; as the spirit descended upon him at the Jordan, so it descended upon us in our baptism. In that moment God gave to us all that we need to live the new life in Christ. I find that wonderful, but also awesome and scary! So often we ignore this, going on this course and that course, trying to deepen our spiritual life or hone our pastoral skills, forgetting that what we need is already within us. What we need to do is to recognise the gifts we've been given and work with them.

This came home to me when I was Vicar in my first parish. It was the time of the Toronto Blessing, and charismatic renewal was making an impact on the Church. I respected and slightly envied those whose lives had been touched in this way, but somehow it didn't seem to be for me. On retreat at West Malling I prayed about this, and was led to what St Paul says about spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians. As I read I saw my gifts described, and I heard in my heart: 'You have got all the gifts you need; get on and use them.' It was a moment of recognition, and it has stayed with me. And I draw strength from it still.

The Minster is a living reminder that God's gifts are for all, and that in those gifts is our strength and our salvation. In Psalm 63 the psalmist cries out to God with a heart that thirsts for him 'like a dry, weary land without water.' Although we use water as never before our lives are dry; although we can travel anywhere we wander aimlessly in a spiritual wilderness; although we can tap all the world's resources we have no one to strike the rock so that the life-giving water may flow into our hearts. On Saturday the Bishop will give you authority to baptize in the name of Christ, to be the minister of spiritual renewal to his people. The Greek word for baptize means to drench or drown. When the Greeks sank a ship they said they had baptized it. God wants us to drench his people with his Spirit, not just to make them mildly damp! His new life comes through being drowned by his grace and generosity. This sounds scary, but in fact the gift is gentle, like the dove that descended upon Jesus; and like the dove, the Spirit gives us wings.

To be a *living* reminder we too need to grow in the Spirit. God has given us all we need, but we need his help to believe this. Pray for that help and you will not be disappointed. Ask God to help you to turn to him, to be open to him, so that he may form in you the person he made you to become. Rowan Williams in *Silence and Honeycakes*, talks of the temptation to be someone else, a temptation fed by our culture of cult figures and celebrities. The Church is not immune from this with its charismatic leaders and power evangelists. But the real challenge is not to emulate them, but to be yourself. In the end, the Archbishop says, I shall be asked, not why I wasn't the greatest this or that, but why I wasn't Rowan Williams.

In the silence ask God to renew in you his baptismal gifts, for he has given you all you need. This water will remain here. If you wish, come to the water, place your hands in it; let it wet your head; open your hands and receive from God all that he promises you.

'Let him who is thirsty come.

Let him who desires take the water of life without price.'

(Revelation 22.17)

St Etheldreda's Day

LIVING

Etheldreda came to Ely in 673 to realise her long-held desire to found a monastery. No-one knows for certain where it was sited, nor much about its life, save that it was a mixed community for men and women. It was destroyed by the Vikings in the ninth century, but restored in the tenth century by St Dunstan and St Ethelwold as a Benedictine community for men only, and the monastic life was lived at Ely under the Rule of St Benedict until the Dissolution in 1539. Whether Saxon or Norman, the monastic community was a living reminder to their fellow Christians that they were a people set apart for God's service. The monastic routine provided a balanced way of life with prayer at its heart, and at the heart of their prayer was silence.

'Listen' is the first word of St Benedict's Rule: 'The disciple's role', he says, 'is to be silent and listen.' The spiritual journey begins with learning to listen. The monastic routine, now as then, includes long periods of silence, including the *summa silentium*, the great silence beginning in the evening and ending after breakfast the next day. Here, especially in the early morning, is time for prayer and meditation. Benedict taught his monks the art of sacred reading, *lectio divina*. It's a way of letting the Bible form you, of entering into the rhythm of God. As Abbot Christopher Jamieson said in the recent BBC series *The Monastery*, using the Bible in prayer is not the same as Bible study. Instead of starting with the questions that the text poses – questions that drown out the insights of the heart, we start by listening to the insights of our hearts and attending to them first rather than to the questions. I can only say that I have found this very valuable; it's one way of putting myself under the authority of scripture. The questions don't necessarily go away, but often they are answered on a level other than the intellectual.

Silence is in short supply in the modern world where stillness is crowded out by noise and constant activity, and where we want to be heard rather than to listen. But anyone who is serious about their spiritual life must say 'No' to the noise and learn to listen. The first step towards spiritual renewal is to find a time to be silent each day, even if it is only for a few minutes.

Silence is where we encounter God in our depths. To be a *living* reminder we must deepen our inner life, the well-spring of the Spirit. Use the silence to listen to the insights of your heart – for that is where God speaks to you. Being a living reminder is to live from the heart, like Etheldreda and Benedict. Attend to the insights of your heart, for there, as St Paul says, the Spirit prays within you with sighs too deep for words. If you have not yet developed the practice of having a quiet time each day, then let this retreat be the beginning. The single most important thing you can do to deepen and sustain your ministry is to preserve your quiet time – that and being religious about your day off! You can't lead others to God unless you are letting him lead you to himself.

TOUCH

*Jesus took a child, set him in front of them, and put his arms around him.
‘Whoever receives a child like this in my name,’ he said, ‘receives me; and
whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me.’*

MARK 9.36, 37

If water is essential to life, then touch is important for survival. Take a good look at your hands – they keep us in touch with the material world, enabling us to do our work, but they also help us to form relationships, especially close relationships with others. So basic is touch that its hard to imagine what life must be like without hands, never to touch, to feel, to caress; not to be able to use them creatively in work. Those who lack a basic function like touch or sight we refer to as ‘handicapped’, and the derivation of the word shows how basic is the use of our hands. Skilled people who use their hands in their work acquire a dexterity that is beyond thought. A pianist or a violinist, like my wife, will speak of the music being in their fingers, and there is something quite beautiful in the way a craftsman handles the object that he has made.

Hands are part of our language, and one of the things we need to do as we grow is to learn to use our hands sensitively so that our touch communicates what we want to express. Touch communicates many things; in particular it unites, it brings things together and creates bonds. We offer our hand in greeting, in fellowship and in marriage. With our touch we caress those we love, reassure the fearful, comfort the grieving and heal the wounded. The Bible uses all these images and deepens them. To lay on hands is to impart a quality that cannot be erased. The blessing that Isaac gives to Jacob cannot be removed; the scapegoat carries away the sins of the people for ever; the Apostles extend the right hand of fellowship to Paul who thenceforth is one of them.

Jesus touched many people, and his touch was both healing and including. He has called you so that he may use your hands to heal, strengthen and encourage, and to welcome others into his fellowship. The living reminder offers the touch of Christ. When the minister touches in welcome the greeting is more than personal – it opens the door of fellowship. By our touch we order the community, designating people for certain functions, and by our touch we empower them, comfort and heal them. By our touch we designate the bread and the wine that will become for us the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation, and when we touch with oil we anoint – an outward sign of the gift of the Spirit.

The importance of touch has come home to me more and more over the time of my ministry, particularly in the ministry of healing, but also at the Church door. Not many will remember your sermon, but most will remember the way that you greeted them or said goodbye. More hearts are won for Christ by touch than by teaching. Touch says so much more than words. So we take the hand of the grieving and they know that we share their grief; we embrace the fearful and they feel our strength; we lay hands on the sick as Jesus did and his love flows through them. Those who seek us out because they suffer in spirit or are troubled with doubt we touch with our eyes, giving them all our time and attention, so that our words may touch them in their depths.

Offering the touch of Christ is always a privilege and always moving. A lady came for healing in the Cathedral a few weeks ago; she told me her cancer had recurred. I asked where it was. She replied, 'All over really, everywhere; but I don't want to die just yet.' And she smiled. So I prayed for her, and laid my hands on her in the name of Christ. I don't suppose I will see her again – she was just visiting the Cathedral – but I won't forget the courage that her smile conveyed.

The touch of Christ is a touch that reaches out and includes. Jesus touched those whom others avoided, the untouchable: the lepers, the tax collectors and sinners. The touch of Christ creates community, and when Jesus called the young boy and put his arm around him, he was saying something important about the nature of community. His action was to

bring to an end an argument among the disciples about who is the greatest. In a world of soccer stars and pop idols their argument has a contemporary ring. Individualism is nothing new, but in our own day it has become a destructive force. As John Donne said, no man is an island; we are all part of the main, and we sink or swim together. In community we are concerned to serve the interests of others, not selfishly to pursue our own. The Christian community is a sign of the Kingdom, a living reminder that salvation is communal as well as individual.

It's not surprising that in an Age when community has been lost the right use of touch has become a cause of moral concern, because the community keeps alive the social conventions that regulate behaviour and help us to serve the interests of others. When people become their own centre of concern these conventions atrophy and die. We are very free about whom we kiss or embrace, and the intimate touch of love has been degraded into recreational sex and pornography. But touching children, as Jesus did, has become 'off limits', and we establish policies and procedures for child protection. In this morally confused climate law has replaced the Spirit. Morality is an inward quality; it lies in our hearts; external controls may curb bad behaviour, but they do not change lives. Our attempts to impose race or gender equality by law, noble in conception, have turned out to be less effective in practice – as we see in the appalling desecration of Jewish cemeteries. The Christian community is where people learn to live by the Spirit and serve their neighbour. It is a living reminder that our touch is to heal and not to wound, to cherish and not to exploit, to include and not to divide.

May I end as I began by asking you to look at your hands. Your hands will express more than your words. You will use them to build the Body Christ. In the silence ask God to hallow your hands, that your touch may be holy. And take to heart St Teresa of Avila's words:

*Christ has no body on earth but ours,
no hands but ours, no feet but ours;
ours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good;
ours are the hands with which he is to bless men now.*

BREAD & WINE

During supper he took bread, and having said the blessing he broke it and gave it to them, with the words: "Take this; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and having offered thanks to God he gave it to them; and they all drank from it. And he said to them, "This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, shed for many."

MARK 9.36, 37

If you go as a pilgrim to Jerusalem one of the places you will visit is Mount Zion, to the north west of the Old City. There, near the Church of the Dormition, you are led up a stair to an upper chamber. This place is believed to be the Upper Room where on the night that he was betrayed Jesus shared the Last Supper with his disciples. I last stood in that room in 1997, remembering what Jesus had said and done as he took the bread and the wine, blessed them, broke the bread, and gave them to his disciples.

Each Evangelist tells the story of that meal in his own way. St Mark brings out the complete isolation of Jesus in his Passion. At the meal Mark does not record the command: 'Do this in remembrance of me.' Instead Jesus says: 'Truly I tell you: never again shall I drink from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.' (Mark 14.25) These are the words of someone about to undergo a trial, a severe testing, a time of sacrifice. But this time of trial looks forward to a new time, the time of a new relationship between God and Man that his life has brought into being, and which his death will complete. Sacrifice brings about a new relationship that is life-giving.

Cardinal Hume tells a moving story of how this truth came home to him in a new way. At the time of the first Live Aid concert, he went to Ethiopia when the famine was at its height. One day he visited a settlement where the people were waiting for food. As he got out of the helicopter a young boy came up to him and took his hand. 'He was,' says Hume, 'aged about nine or ten and had nothing on but a loincloth.'

The whole of the time I spent there, that child would not let go of my hand. He had two gestures: with one hand he pointed to his mouth to indicate his need for food; the other was a strange gesture, he took my hand and rubbed it on his cheek.

‘I realized slowly that he was lost and totally alone – and starving. I have never forgotten that incident and to this day wonder if that child is alive. I remember when I boarded the helicopter to leave he stood and looked at me reproachfully; an abandoned, starving ten-year-old child.

‘I appreciated in quite a new way those two profound and fundamental needs – for food and for love. It was much later that day that I realized in a new way the secret of the Eucharist, for the Eucharist is food and love... There is no life without food, and no life worth living without love.’ (*Light in the Lord*)

Providing both food and love involve sacrifice, and as the minister offers bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, s/he is a living reminder of this truth. But the world is in two minds about this. We are willing to make sacrifices for those closest to us, but not for those far away – like that young boy in Ethiopia. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus taught us that our neighbour is anyone in need; their need puts a claim on our love, differences of race and religion notwithstanding. Sacrifice does not allow us to pass by on the other side; it cuts across the ethics of exclusivity and division, and the keep-yourself-to-yourself mindset. Sacrifice sets limits to choice, and we need to recover the way of sacrifice if only because we are drowning in a culture in which choice has become a god. We don’t feed our inner selves or offer love to others by multiplying choice, indulging desire, and looking after our own, but by being Christ-like. There are limits to choice and the salvation of the world depends on us realizing this. As John V. Taylor, the former Bishop of Winchester, wrote in *Enough is Enough*: ‘Technology is safe only in a context of worship. Science should walk hand in hand with sacrifice.’

As the minister presides at the Eucharist and speaks the words of Christ he/she is a living reminder that the way of sacrifice is the

only way, and it can be isolating and testing for us as it was for Jesus. Two years ago I felt very tired. The cathedral can be a very draining place and I was inclined to put it down to that, but then I sensed that my tiredness was really something to do with the mess the world was in – Iraq, GM crops, global warming, moral confusion. I remembered feeling the same way some years earlier at the height of the Thatcher years. I realized then that the state of the world was part of the spiritual battle, and the priest who stands before God with the people on her heart is there in the midst of it.

Keeping going in the way of Christ when the world is going the other way is a tough call. Cardinal Hume felt this too. Writing about the story of Jesus walking across the water to the disciples as they rowed hard against the wind, he said, ‘I think so much of our ministry is rowing against the wind. That is my experience, the sense of being on my own. It is then that Jesus says, “Take courage”.’ It may seem odd, but I think the way to hear these words of Jesus and to gain strength from them is to walk the path of humility. That is the way that St Benedict offered his monks, of whom Basil Hume was one. Perhaps this above all is what a living reminder must represent.

Humility comes from the Latin *humus*, meaning earth. Humility is about being earthed, being in touch with the source of our being. Humility is not a weak thing – always putting yourself down, but an inner strength that comes from a true appreciation of your place before God and within the community – a strength that means that you don’t have to have your own way all the time. Humility is the foundation of love, the willingness to put the needs of others first – near and far away – to learn from them and to suffer for them.

Humility helps us to achieve an inner freedom that frees us from selfish impulses and allows us to be shaped by other people’s lives, and by the life that we offer in bread and wine.

*Bend my heart to your will, O God;
by your word give me life.*

St John the Baptist's Day

REMINDER

There's a place in Zimbabwe called Cyrene, and its school has a lovely chapel with some beautiful wall paintings. One shows St John the Baptist and St Paul. The contrast between them is striking. Paul is cultivated and neatly dressed, with a medallion hanging round his neck; John is dressed in rough skins, a staff in one hand and the other raised in an urgent gesture. They were both uncompromising figures, but the painting of John captures it better. There he is in the Judean wilderness proclaiming his urgent message: 'Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is upon you!'

John was a living reminder; he stirred up memories – communal memories of the prophets of old who had similarly called the people to repentance, and personal memories of sin and shame that needed healing. John's message found its mark, and large numbers of people flocked to him and were baptized by him, confessing their sins.

As Henri Nouwen says, 'Our memory plays a central role in our sense of being. Our pains and joys, our feelings of grief and satisfaction, are not dependent simply on the events of our lives, but also, and even more so, on the way we remember these events.'

In the Bible remembrance is a strong word. It's much more than reminiscing, bringing to mind old times and then putting them back to sleep. Remembrance recalls the past with power and allows it to shape our future. As Alan Richardson said, 'When we remember something from the past, we do not merely entertain a pale idea of it; we actually make it potent in our lives for good or evil.' (*Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*). In a couple of weeks we shall be remembering the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Memories of war are potent memories. In May 1999 there took place the last annual pilgrimage of the Dunkirk veterans to the beaches in France from which they were rescued. John Davidson of *The Independent*, began his report:

‘The white-whiskered Royal Navy veteran, both sides of his chest heavy with medals, shook uncontrollable with grief while still standing to attention. A young woman silently passed him paper handkerchiefs.’ Standing there on the beach brought it all back. The old man’s grief expressed the power of his memories. He could see it all: the rescue craft, the crowds trying to climb aboard; those who made it, and those who didn’t. He could feel it all again; and he lived it all again.

That, for me, is a very moving picture of the power of memory. To be a living *reminder* our remembrance must go deep, like the old soldier’s memories. He was saved from death in battle; the church is formed by its memory of a death through which the world was saved. If, as Nouwen says, it’s the way we remember things that forms us, then we as living reminders have to ask ourselves how we remember that death? We need to enter the mystery of the Eucharist, rather than its theology, so that when we say the words of Christ they come alive in their power. Our theology will never be adequate to the mystery, it is enough to know that when we celebrate the Eucharist we don’t simply remember why Jesus died, we keep alive the power of his death and through it we receive for ourselves his last and greatest gift, the forgiveness of sins.

It’s not clear from the Gospels what sort of Messiah John expected Jesus to be; indeed later in the story he seems unsure if Jesus was the One who was to come, and he sent messengers to ask. But he was always clear that he was just the herald, as he said, ‘He must increase; I must decrease.’ (*John 3.30*) The messenger must not get in the way of the message. Somehow or other the living reminder has to put aside ambition, the desire for affirmation, models of charismatic leadership, and so on, and find joy, as John did, in simply pointing to Christ.

LIGHT

Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world. No follower of mine shall walk in darkness; he shall have the light of life.'

JOHN 8.12

Light is another powerful symbol, as essential to life as water; growth is impossible without it. Light is essential for movement; without it we cannot see our way. Light is essential for judgement; without it we cannot distinguish the true from the false. Light is used in the Bible to symbolise the deepest mysteries of God and the most ineffable truths. It is the symbol of God in his goodness:

O my God thou art great indeed,
clothed in majesty and splendour,
and wrapped in a robe of light. *(Psalm 104.1)*

In the first, great cry of creation, 'Let there be light', God wills that his being be in all that he will make. Matter must be enlightened if it is to have life. How are we to enable the world to hear that cry, and to be enlightened? I want to offer two ways: we could begin by being more concerned for virtue rather than values, and by striving for wisdom rather than knowledge. Both virtue and wisdom are practical expressions of the light of Christ, the light that keeps us from walking in darkness. Wisdom is knowledge enlightened, and the wise are those enlighten others. Wisdom comes from our depths, it enables us to weigh experience and discern the truth. St Paul refers to Jesus as the wisdom of God (*1 Cor 1.24*). Jesus saw through the cleverness of the teachers of his age and taught with true authority, and his teaching always speaks to the heart. Time and again in the Sermon on the Mount he says, 'You have heard that our forefathers were told... but what I tell you is this...' And each time he puts the emphasis on intention rather than deed. So it is not simply the act of adultery that is sinful, but wrongful intentions:

lustful desire; and so on. The path of wisdom is also the path of virtue. What is within is more important than what is without.

We live in a world in which cleverness is prized above wisdom, and which for many seems dark. Despite our technical progress we are unable to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and provide justice for the poor; and we lack, it seems, the will to curb that progress before climate change overwhelms us. As E. F. Schumacher said memorably, 'We have become too clever to be able to live without wisdom.' (*Small is Beautiful*) Indeed Alasdair Macintyre, in the much-quoted conclusion of his book *After Virtue*, says that we are entering a new Dark Age. The way of wisdom, as Macintyre suggests, is to recover the path of virtue.

We do not hear much about virtue these days. Virtue has been replaced by values in today's world, but the two are not the same. Virtue has something given about it, an objective quality which values do not have. Values are chosen; they represent the qualities and ethical standards we chose to live by. Of course, we are not entirely free agents when choosing our values; they often arise through social and commercial pressures, and many are moral and seek to serve the common good. Even so, values come in many different colours, and in our post-modern world they tend to be eclectic – chosen to enable us to live the life we want to lead, without too much concern whether they form a mutually consistent package. The point is that they are *my* values; values come from *me*.

Virtue, by contrast, is an inner quality, a grace that enables us to conform our being to the truth, to live a life that is morally pleasing to God. Virtue is God-given; it is part of the light that comes from God himself. Virtue accepts that God has determined the qualities and ethical standards that enable us to live a true human life, and it gives us the inner strength to live by those qualities and standards, particularly when they are altruistic. Virtue is not concerned so much with life style as with life-giving style. These are *God's* values. Virtue comes from *God*.

Virtue is like light; it saves us from wandering in the dark, and the minister is a living reminder that virtue comes before values. This is a

tough calling in a consumer society which believes that all moral choices are equally valid, and that there are no absolute values. Pleasure is what life is all about; appearance is what matters – you can be whom you want to be, choosing your *persona* according to how you feel; you are your own god, the centre of your world. Consumerism is opposed to the virtuous life; it is, quite literally, soul-destroying. At root this is a struggle for a new economics, a new way of understanding our destiny and happiness that does not depend on increasing consumption – but that is another story.

Exalting values over virtue hollows us out as people, especially the values of the modern work-place, a theme explored by Richard Sennett in a recent book entitled *The Corrosion of Character*. By ‘corrosion’ Sennett does not mean ‘corruption’, that is the subversion of character by wrong devices and desires, but the way in which we are hollowed out, or eaten away, as people. The short-term goals, flexible working practices, constant risk-taking and superficial relationships of the modern economy turn us into short-term, flexible, superficial people who shy away from commitment and moral clarity. Sennett tells the story of Rico, a second generation Italian American. By any standards Rico was well off: upwardly mobile, well-housed, and able to afford the best education for his children. But to achieve this Rico had moved house four times in fourteen years, each time having to start his life over again. After being downsized he set up in business on his own, but the demands of his work meant that he was at his clients’ beck and call with no time for his family; he said, ‘It’s like I don’t know who my kids are.’ His fear is that they will become ‘mall rats’, hanging about aimlessly in shopping centres. Rico felt he belonged nowhere, and could not offer the substance of his life as an example to his children of how they should conduct themselves ethically.

Rico’s life had been shaped by the values of the modern economy, and they had corroded his character, like acid eats away at metal. He no longer felt able to sustain social relations or to be able to offer durable guidance. The world in which he had to behave flexibly in order to

survive had taken its toll; his character had become flexible and he was no longer sure what he stood for. The world for him had become dark. There are thousands that feel like Rico, ordinary people who want to feed their spirits as well as their bodies, and want to pass on something enduring to their kids. They seek a guide who will lead them to the light.

The living reminder is that guide. The four cardinal virtues, prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude, offer a practical way of walking the path of virtue. I expect they would have helped Rico achieve a more balanced life. They are not so much about moral rectitude as cultivating wisdom, or discernment, the quality that St Benedict described as the mother of all virtue. *Prudence* is the insight that enables us to discern what is both necessary and possible in any given situation. *Justice* is the desire to take everyone's needs seriously and to treat them fairly. *Temperance* is the strength of will to moderate our appetites and not be dominated by others, or simply go along with the crowd. And *fortitude* is the moral strength that enables us to withstand temptation and to bear suffering and misunderstanding.

If we are entering a new Dark Age then we will be ministering in testing times, but we need not be fearful. God in Christ has promised us that no follower of his shall walk in the dark; he has put in our hearts the light that he willed be in all creation, and which shall never be overcome. The Book of Revelation uses the symbol of a lamp to represent the churches. There is a light on the altar for each of us, our personal lamp, a symbol of the light of Christ within us. And if it seems too small a light to banish the darkness, be encouraged by St Benedict. He taught his monks the path of virtue, and the communities he founded kept the faith and the values of European civilisation alive during the Dark Ages. In the silence ask God to enthrone virtue in your heart so that you may shine with his light and 'Above all prefer nothing whatever to Christ.' (*St Benedict*)

*So shall God's will on earth be done;
new lamps be lit, new tasks begun.*

The Ordination

SEND ME

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord, high and lifted up.

ISAIAH 6.1

Some events remain in the memory and shape our lives. It was in the year that the saintly King Uzziah died that Isaiah received his call to be a prophet. In that year, in the Temple in Jerusalem, he had a vision that changed his life. He saw the Lord enthroned amidst the heavenly host, and he heard their song: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.' The vision was so awesome that it seemed that the Temple shook to its foundations. The power of the vision reminds him of his own unworthiness: 'Woe is me! For I am a man of unclean lips,' he cries. But his lips are cleansed with holy fire, because God has called him. The Lord of Hosts, high and exalted, needs his help; the Lord says, 'Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?', and Isaiah replies, 'Here am I! Send me.' (*Isaiah 6.8*)

This afternoon we set apart for the Lord's service nineteen men and women who, like Isaiah, have heard the call of the Lord and have replied, 'Here am I! Send me.' No one feels worthy of the call, or adequate for the task, but those whom God sends he empowers, and touches their lips with holy fire. And they, like Isaiah, are sent to be living reminders of the glory of God, and the love of God.

To be human is to remember. Without memories life would be a series of incidents without meaning or connection. Without memory we should have no idea of what it means to be British or a Christian. Memory connects our past to our present and gives us our future. Those whom God calls he sends to bring to life memories that connect our past to our present and give us our future.

Whom shall I send? Who will go for us? Here am I; send me.

God sends us to be a healing reminder. We all carry painful memories of past hurts: of loss and grief; of illness, anxiety and fear; of rejection and loneliness; of physical abuse and violence. Our impulse may be to forget them, and to try and live as though they had not happened. But by forgetting them we allow them to become independent forces that can cripple our lives. What has been forgotten cannot be healed. A living reminder offers a space in which the wounding memories of the past can be reached and brought back into the light without fear. 'The great vocation of the minister is continuously to make connections between the human story and the divine story.' (*Henri Nouwen*) A healing reminder does not solve problems or take away pain, but rather helps us see how our pains are part of a greater pain, that our sorrows are part of a greater sorrow, that our experience is part of the great experience of Jesus who took the pain of humanity upon himself and transformed it.

*Whom shall I send to those in pain and sorrow? Who will go for us?
Here am I; send me.*

God sends us to be a sustaining reminder. Perhaps you watched the recent BBC series *The Monastery*. It was about five men who in different ways were searching for inner peace during forty days at Worth Abbey in Sussex. There is a collective memory that says there is more to life than this! And for each of the five men there are countless thousands who are looking for something deeper to sustain them than the choices on offer in a materialistic world.

Some years ago I heard a chance remark on the radio that has stayed with me: our problem today is not meaninglessness but rootlessness. We are a rootless generation. Roots keep us in touch with the source of life; cut off from our roots we wither and die; so God sends his ministers to give his people roots that they may grow. Just as it is the community that keeps memories alive, it is the community that keeps us rooted, and enables our deep longings to become a way of life, the habits of the heart. The basic Christian community is the Eucharistic fellowship, and as she or he celebrates the Eucharist the minister sustains the people with the life of God himself.

Whom shall I send to those who long for peace in their souls? Who will go for us? Here am I; send me.

God sends us to be a guiding reminder. The problems that confront us, from global warming to human cloning, are so huge that hope seems to have died. Morally we have lost our way, and no one can find the map. Hope is built on our memories; we can hope for a new dawn because we have seen a new dawn before. And we can hope for moral renewal because we have been renewed before. Through his Word of truth God has shown us the way to live in peace and to make our choices life-giving. Jesus came as the living word, the expression in human form of the eternal God; and he was God's sign to us that love is the only way. Love is about taking everyone's interests seriously, and about being willing to put the needs of others before the needs of self. We see what this means internationally in the campaign to remit the unpayable debts of the world's poorest nations. We see it also in the selfless devotion of carers to those for whom they care. In these and many other ways the word takes flesh and lives among us. Love requires sacrifice, as these examples show. When we are willing to make sacrifices hope is re-born, and we are given the moral resources to tackle the problems that confront us. A guiding reminder brings the Word of God alive in our hearts so that we learn to live by its rhythm; a guiding reminder is to teach the way of sacrifice, and not just to teach but also, and much more so, to live it.

Whom shall I send to the lost and confused? Who will go for us?

Here am I; send me.

As St Paul said, 'Faithful is the One who calls.' (1 Thessalonians 5.24) Isaiah knew this, and so do you. It is love that calls, empowers and sends men and women to be his living reminders, to heal, to sustain and to guide. That love changed the world and he will change it again. To him be the glory, now and for ever. Amen.