

A celebration of Self Supporting Ministry

St. Margaret's Church, Westminster Abbey | Steven Croft, Bishop of Sheffield

13 September 2011

Jeremiah 1.4-10 | Matthew 5.13-19

David is one of the unsung heroes of the Diocese where he serves. He has been a self-supporting minister in the rural benefice where he lives for over twenty years. He is now well into his retirement years, still sustaining the life and ministry of four congregations and communities.

Tim is in his early twenties. He is pioneering a new church community for young adults in the centre of a large city. He is in his second year of training for ordained pioneer ministry. He has already gathered a community of over fifty young adults. He draws a small salary from his sending church but has no other means of support. God willing he will be ordained in due course to serve this new community.

Karen works in the NHS as a senior nurse. She is also a priest of the Church of England. She regards herself as a priest in the workplace and is assistant curate in her local parish. She has a heart for people and a passion to change the church and she loves to bend the bishops ear.

Graham is a senior manager from nine to five. In the evenings and at weekends for the last four years he has been priest in charge of two small parishes. The congregations in both are steadily growing.

Each of these men and women and thousands like them have responded to a call of God to be ordained. Postal workers, teachers, bankers, youth workers, homemakers, doctors, academics and business people. Each making a profound difference for the better in their workplace, in their local community and in the church. They are some of the three thousand self supporting ordained ministers in the Church of England who serve as deacons and priests in every kind of context. They represent over one quarter of the Church of England's clergy and the proportion is growing. There is no average hours worked. The majority offer more than ten hours per week. Many more than twenty. But we do know the average financial reward: zero. This service is offered to God, church and community as a gift.

Today the Church remembers John Chrysostom, Bishop in Constantinople in the fourth century. John was famous as a preacher and teacher. He is also famous for writing about how difficult it is to be a priest. These are some of his words. They are words with which I can identify:

"I know my own soul, how feeble and puny it is; I know the magnitude of this ministry, and the great difficulty of the work; for more stormy billows vex the soul of a priest than the gales which disturb the sea"

Despite his many gifts, John fled the call to be ordained. His reluctance is remembered still in the ordination liturgy of the orthodox church when the candidate is dragged forcibly from the back of the church by the people and presented to the bishop. He identified strongly with the call to Jeremiah, that reluctant prophet who heard the call of God as a young man and knew he was inadequate. John identified with Moses, the greatest of God's servants in the Old Testament, who spends two chapters in the Book of Exodus presenting excuse after excuse in response to God's call culminating in the heartfelt plea: "O my Lord, please send someone else"

To be a priest is a high and holy calling. John Chrysostom argues that a physician must treat the ills of the body. How much harder is it to apply medicine to the diseases of the soul which cannot be seen. A general must rouse his troops and lead an army into battle. How much harder is it to exercise leadership in the church and among the people of God. It is a calling which demands integrity of life across the whole of life. That search for integrity becomes more rather than less complex if you are also pursuing another profession.

Self-supporting ministry has a long pedigree in the Christian church. Jesus himself we know was a carpenter by profession not a full time religious teacher. His first disciples were fishermen on Galilee. Paul, the greatest evangelist of the early church, earned his living by plying the trade of tentmaking. Lydia, who hosted the first church on European soil in Philippi was a business woman and a dealer in purple cloth. Early Christian ministry was a blend of those who could be supported and set aside for their ministry and those who supported themselves and no doubt everything in between.

Over the last fifty years, the Church of England has intentionally recovered the long tradition of self supporting ordained ministry. There have been many stumbling blocks and hesitations along the way: many twists and turns in the route. We have not got everything right in the past or the present. As a church we still undervalue the gifts of self supporting ministers; under-support and underplay what they have achieved. As so often in the Church of England, we set the bar of initial training too high and the bar of ongoing support, supervision and development too low.

There is no single way to describe self supporting ordained ministry at the present time. What we have is a kaleidoscope of patterns of vocation – a rainbow as the grace of God is refracted through many different lives into different colours and patterns. A bewildering range of initials is used to describe these many different ministries: NSM; MSE; SSM; APM; SSOPM; OLM. If you don't speak the language then ask someone next to you for an interpretation. I would personally abandon them all and speak simply of self-supporting ministers who are ordained priests in the Church of God. From time to time each may have a particular focus of their vocation and over time that focus will change and evolve, contributing to the whole.

Self-supporting ministers make a significant contribution to the life of the Church. But they make a more significant contribution still to the common good – to the well being of our society. Many do that through building up and sustaining the life of local congregations and communities. In many of the communities I serve as bishop the parish church is one of the very few organizations left which builds coherence and social capital and enables people to

work for the common good. Sustaining a parish church in a former mining town or a rural community is like planting a tree in a parched desert landscape. An active church changes the social ecology of its community. All kinds of good things grow in its shade. It becomes a centre of volunteering; of relationships; of care.

But many self-supporting ministers see their primary role also as bearing a witness to the Christian faith and the person of Christ through the whole of their life not simply the time they offer to their local parish. They stand as people of public integrity and trust and hospitality and truth and love in offices, factories and schools throughout the country. It is no small thing to wear a clerical collar to work. Our nation at the present time cannot have too many people who public stand up for honesty and truth; loving your neighbour as yourself and seeking to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Jesus is very clear in the Sermon on the Mount. He does not call his disciples to be the salt of the congregation but the salt of the earth. He calls us not to be lights in the church but lights to the world. Self supporting ministers are often the front line in that calling.

In my own Diocese of Sheffield we are working to grow the number of self supporting ordained ministers by at least 200% over the next five years. We currently have over 20 people exploring vocation to this ministry. I hope as the Church of England nationally we will see the numbers of self supporting ministers of all kinds continue to grow and to double over the next decade and that we will continue to get better at all kinds of training and support and reflection about their ministry.

John Chrysostom is realistic about the difficulties of priesthood. But he is also very affirming of this vocation.

John draws attention to the wonderful passage in John's gospel where the risen Christ has breakfast on the shore of Lake Galilee with his disciples. In that passage, Chrysostom argues, to be a priest is among the greatest evidence of love for Christ. You may remember the question Jesus asks Peter three times on the shore as they walk together alone after breakfast. Simon Peter do you love me more than these? You perhaps remember that three times Simon Peter confesses his love for Christ, just as three times he has denied him. Lord, you know I love you. But do you remember how Jesus then asks Peter to show this love for Christ? Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. What does it mean to feed Christ's sheep except to be a shepherd, a priest in God's church, to preach the word of God and to minister the sacraments of grace.

We offer this ministry to God's church and God's world because we have been called. We offer this ministry to God's church and to God's world as a sign of our love for Christ who has called us, healed us, forgiven and restored us.

Amen.