THE CALLING OF A BISHOP

Sermon at the Eucharist
on St Oswald’s Day


In one of my earliest conversations with Bishop John, now ten years ago, I drew his attention to the fact that no fewer than three of his predecessors were canonized saints, not to mention a couple of others who are also commemorated in the Church’s calendar. I meant what I said to be encouraging, but Bishop John thought I was setting the bar rather high, and muttered about there being no pressure, then. But none of us can escape our predecessors, least of all today, when we celebrate the one thousand and twenty-sixth anniversary of the death of Bishop Oswald, the very evening before we also celebrate the tenth anniversary of the enthronement of Bishop John. Bishop John is, incidentally, either the seventeenth or eighteenth Bishop of Worcester called John, depending on whether or not you include the doubtfully elected John of Thoresby in 1349.

But let this evening not be a contest between Oswald the First and John the Seventeenth or Eighteenth. If I may put
the matter neutrally and diplomatically, we know rather too much about Bishop John and rather too little about Bishop Oswald for a contest to be fair. We have shared a great deal with Bishop John during these years. We have received from him so much of the three ‘hums’ he set before us in his enthronement sermon: the three ‘hums’ of humour, humility and humanity. We have shared, very notably, in the sorrows and in the joys of his personal life. By comparison, St Oswald as a personality recedes into the shadows of his time. So instead of saying more about either of them, let us think about bishops in general.

When a bishop is ordained in the Church of England, the archbishop says these words:

Bishops are ordained to be shepherds of Christ’s flock and guardians of the faith of the apostles, proclaiming the gospel of God’s kingdom and leading his people in mission. Obedient to the call of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, they are to gather God’s people and celebrate with them the sacraments of the new covenant. Thus formed into a single communion of faith and love, the Church in each place and time is united with the Church in every place and time.

That bishops are called to be pastors – shepherds – is plain from both the epistle and the gospel today. The first
letter of Peter speaks of ‘elders’ such as Peter himself as having the task of ‘tending the flock of God’ on the behalf of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. And in the gospel reading, Peter is himself commissioned for that task by the Chief Shepherd, who tells him to feed his lambs and tend his sheep.

At the ordination of a bishop, the archbishop goes on to say that a bishop ‘guards the faith of the apostles’, ‘proclaims the gospel of God’s kingdom’, ‘leads God’s people in mission’, and ‘gathers God’s people to celebrate with them the sacraments of the new covenant’. Thus the work of a bishop focusses the work of the whole Church - the one is the microcosm of the other – and when bishop and people are so united in their shared task, then, we are told, ‘the Church in each place and time is united with the Church in every place and time’.

This evening’s celebration is a striking instance of that. The tasks to which Oswald was consecrated more than a millennium ago are recognisably the tasks to which Bishop John was consecrated fifteen years ago, and to which he re-dedicated himself ten years ago when he was enthroned in this place. And those tasks are all of a piece with the work of bishops throughout the world, as, for instance, in our partner-dioceses of Morogoro and Peru today.
We need those long and broad perspectives of time and place. It is easy to be focussed on the here-and-now; easy to be preoccupied with the problems, difficulties and discouragements of the here-and-now, and to forget the longer and broader perspectives of the Church in *every* time and *every* place, of which we are so small a part. These longer and broader perspectives speak to us of the Church of the saints, the Church of the apostles, the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep; who, as the Letter to the Hebrews says is ‘the same, yesterday, today, and for ever’. Tonight we give thanks for those who have exercised the ministry of bishop in this place: Bosel and Dunstan, Oswald and Wulfstan, Hugh Latimer and Charles Gore. Tonight we also give thanks for ten years of John’s ministry in this place. And we commit ourselves anew, bishop and people together, to the guarding of the faith of the apostles, the proclaiming of the gospel of God’s kingdom, the celebrating of the sacraments of the new covenant, and the setting out in mission in obedience to the call of Christ.

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