

## Sermon at the Ordination Service in Milan

2. Corinthians 5.17-6.2;  
John 10.1-16

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Friends, it is a joy and a privilege to be with you today. The need to be creative and flexible under pandemic conditions has brought us together from nearby and far corners of our diocese to the beautiful city of Milan for this joyful occasion of ordination. Four highly gifted deacons, Martin George, Berlin; Robert Morley, Milan; Roxana Teleman, Marseille; and Valdis Tēraudkalns, Riga are being ordained as priests for service in our diocese.

I am honoured to have been asked by Bishop David to deliver the sermon on such a significant occasion. We gather as a diocesan community to witness this milestone in the life of these candidates, to pray for them, their families, and their congregations as an expression of our unity within the diversity of our Diocese in Europe.

May I begin with a quote from Michael Ramsey's cherished book *The Christian Priest Today*: He writes: *It is far from true that while the Church is our Lord's creation the ministry is only a device whereby the Church can be effective.*

This thought is given further attention by Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury and one who has influenced my faith considerably. The New Testament teaches us, he writes, that the *Church is, first of all, a kind of space cleared by God through Jesus in which people may become what God made them to be (God's sons and daughters), and that what we have to do about the Church is not first to organise it as a society but to inhabit it as a climate or a landscape. It is a place where we can see properly: – God, God's creation, ourselves. It is a place or dimension in the universe that is in some way growing towards being the universe itself in restored relation to God. It is a place we are invited to enter, the place occupied by Christ, who is himself the climate and atmosphere of a renewed universe.* In terms of the Church's integrity, Rowan Williams points us to the twofold approach: *by the recognition of a fixed canon of Scripture as God's gift in the Spirit to the Church, a gift that is an act of divine speaking as it is read and received in the community; and by the recognition of apostolic ministry as a continuing element in the Church's constitution. The personal focus of worship*

*and proclamation in the community is one who has publicly and demonstrably received, by a network and sequence of specific relationships, the word and power of the first witnesses.*

Ordination is therefore 'to receive the word and the power of the first witnesses' in response to God's individual call. In this understanding our 4 candidates present themselves for ordination. It is my pleasure to briefly introduce them.

**Martin** was ordained as a Lutheran over 40 years ago. His ordination to the priesthood in the Church of England represents a considerable move whilst not renouncing his Lutheran heritage. He is proceeding in humility, guided by the stirrings of the Holy Spirit. The son also of a well-known Berlin pastor, Martin continues to teach in the prestigious Humboldt University.

**Robert** has lived most of his adult life in Northern Italy where he teaches English. A significant time was spent at a Woodard boarding school where he was steeped in High Church worship. A breadth of spirituality thus comes hand in hand with a challenging academic ability.

**Roxana** was born and brought up in Romania in Soviet times. I am told that she is a brilliant mathematician. Roxana and her husband Andre have both worshipped as Anglicans for over 20 years in various chaplaincies in the diocese. As converts they continue to cherish the Byzantine tradition of their upbringing.

### **Valdis**

Valdis' formative years were spent during the Soviet period. His Christian faith sustained him and deepened, and he returned to study with the Latvian Church for a degree in Theology, just as things were beginning to open up. He taught Theology in the University and headed up the Latvian Bible Society where he oversees the new translation of the bible into common Latvian.

Friends, in our Gospel of the parable of the Shepherd Jesus is providing us with a description of his own calling and ministry. Flowing from it the prototype of the good shepherd has been an inspiration to countless across the world and down the centuries as the model of pastoral and priestly care. We remind ourselves that it is our Lord who lays claim to being **The Good Shepherd** who has the charge of serving God's flock.

This key paradigm of service has, not surprisingly, led to a welter of images, associations, and interpretations, many popular and some even unhelpful. To mind come the rather one-dimensional image of Jesus bearing the one lost sheep across his shoulder or the idyllic

picture of Jesus sitting under the shade of a tree with a lamb on his lap. At the other extreme we know of kings in the Orient of antiquity who defined themselves as shepherds of their people to justify their absolute authority, at best, as benevolent rule **over** a people who could have no mind of their own, but needed to be supervised, controlled, instructed and led in every matter of their lives.

Our own Scriptures are replete with imagery surrounding the role of shepherd and salient personalities in the history of a nomadic people of pastoralists on the journey to becoming a settled nation: Abraham, Moses, David, prophets. This was the heritage Jesus shared and drew on.

Moses and David received a call from God to leave their flocks to take charge of the flock God had chosen for them. It is **this CALL from God** to be a shepherd of God's people that becomes the defining condition for any individual to offer him- or herself for this ministry, however this call may come, over whatever period of time or under whatever circumstance. I want us to reflect together on some of the qualities that Jesus, the Good Shepherd holds out before us.

Let me start by saying that meekness and mildness, as commonly understood, are not foremost in the make-up of shepherds. Nor would they acquire them in the on-the-job, tough training they would undergo. They would not have had much time on their hands to lazily gaze and meditate in lush pastures while the sheep safely grazed around them. They needed to be on permanent alert, for wild beasts could at any time attack from out of the crevices and behind outcrops of the rugged countryside. They had to be quick to discern and judge impending danger and then to act, often bravely and robustly, not having much time to count the possible cost. Panicking sheep needed to be brought together with a steady hand and a firm but reassuring voice. The **protection** of the sheep was their charge. A good shepherd was the **gate** to the sheep. In the ancient Middle East, the door to the sheepfold was provided by the shepherd himself when he lay across the entrance at night to keep the sheep in and the wild beasts out. This entrance was the only legitimate way into the sheepfold. Any other way meant climbing over the wall, a route that thieves took.

Equal to this charge to protect, and indeed the prime charge, was to **lead** the flock to good pastures. Sheep are not animals that can be kept in pens or tight enclosures, fed with bales of hay. They need to graze over open spaces, seeking the grass and herbs of their choice – an

echo of Rowan Williams' 'Inhabiting God's creation as a climate or landscape'. Again, considering the inhospitable, craggy landscape, this space could often not be wide enough, this space was a changing space. One who knows the surrounding terrain, whose judgement is sound and above all who has the wellbeing of the sheep – what they require to flourish - uppermost in mind, brings the qualities of leadership and guidance that are required of a good shepherd. Leadership in ministry also means knowing the space, the context of the life of the people in one's charge and judging it correctly.

Thirdly, these qualities of protection and leadership are undergirded by a **relationship of mutual and voluntary trust** which is built between the shepherd and his or her sheep. Not subservient trust or obedience on the part of the sheep are to be expected; nor on the part of the shepherd is the trust of the sheep to be gained by asserting authority which leaves the sheep with no choice but to follow. The sheep know their needs; at the same time, they have learned to recognise the shepherd's voice which signals well-meaning care and the **knowledge and love** for each single sheep, however different each is from the other, and however contrary individual sheep may be. Sheep are precious.

As a fourth aspect I wish to draw attention to the **mobile, one could say the unconventional, fringe aspect of the life of sheep and shepherds**. Remember how David was chosen: Samuel was told to go and select one of Jesse's sons to be anointed king over Israel. One by one Samuel turned down the sons Jesse presented. Only when specifically asked whether there was not one more son whom Jesse had missed out, did he remember David who was out somewhere in the wilds caring for the sheep. David was for Jesse not only **not the obvious choice**; he was **the least likely choice**. As the youngest he had been left with fulfilling a necessary but thankless task without the socially approved status to go with it. Totally overlooked was the honing of essential qualities which the shepherd boy was all the while gaining for the purpose of leading his people. Always on the move with his flock to find new pastures, weathering storms and coping with the scorching heat, a shepherd learned adaptability, resourcefulness and holding responsibility.

Shepherds therefore spent the best part of their lives left to their own devices outside so-called civilized society. Therefore, when Jesus describes the Good Shepherd, he is opening our eyes to the unrecognized qualities that shape these outsiders, not as oddities or people unfit for service in 'normal' and accepted society, but precisely because one can look to these individuals for leadership, protection, and loving concern. **They** have learned to face up to and

live with suddenly changing circumstances, to adapt, and re-prioritise without compromising what is essential.

These times under Covid-19 have put our churches and congregations under stress situations in which priests have practically overnight been forced to abandon the well-practised and well-accepted physical patterns of worship, liturgy, pastoral care and administration, while struggling to remain true to the core of their calling. Individuals and congregations have needed protection and guidance spontaneously and creatively under circumstances which were inconceivable before the outbreak of the pandemic. Disoriented congregations, individuals suffering loss of loved ones, loss of jobs or facing near intolerable family situations looked to their priest, the shepherd in Christ for help and reassurance. At the same time the shepherd was having to deal with his/her own crises.

This brings me to the fifth and final hallmark of the shepherd's role. It is a **costly** one. God forbid we will be required to pay the ultimate price of life and livelihood. But there will be costs to bear along the way. And there will be lonely times.

At this point, before what is to be expected of priests as shepherds weighs all too heavily, we remind ourselves that Jesus when describing the Good Shepherd is referring to **himself**. It is he who has gone ahead to lead us tenderly and lovingly to good pasture and beside the still waters; it is he who protects and defends us with his rod and staff and comforts us through the valley of the shadow of death; it is he who has paid the costliest price of giving his life on the Cross so that we may live in hope and enter his joy. As priests you and I are called to follow his example, to live in close communion with him and lead his people.

Martin, Robert, Roxana and Valdis: welcome to the joys and adventures of priestly ministry. You will be trusted with the pastoral and priestly care of people. You will also be trusted with a wider community whom you are called to love as neighbours. This ministry becomes exciting when you give and earn the love of the people both in the congregation as well as those outside. The rainbow of relationships is what you are called to keep shining. You **can** trust in the grace of God and your Good Shepherd Jesus Christ. Amen.