

Sermon Outlines on the Religious Life

Sermon for city centre church with large eclectic congregation.

A sermon outline by Catherine CSC

Challenge – Marx wrong to say religion was the opium of the people – hadn't read the hard sayings of Jesus – challenging like today's gospel

But we all need challenge – something to stretch us – climbing mountains etc

Religious life can be a challenge to others, when see the way we live

Ties up with last sentence of gospel – about grabbing hold of life and “killing it off”

Reminds me of blowing bubbles. If let go, then enjoy the beauty and wonder

The call of God to an individual is a challenge – maybe to radical change, to apparent letting go of so much that is valued – but it opens the doors to new possibilities and opportunities. This is the mystery behind the Christian life – God in his great love calls each one of us – hoping for a response of loving obedience.

This call is to all – we respond through Christian commitment, expressed through baptismal promises. There is a unique call for each person, and for a few it is the call to live out the Christian life within the context of a religious community. This is not a call for the strong, who can live heroically – rather it is for the weak, who need the encouragement and support of others committed to the same path.

What makes this life different from that of other Christians?

- It is life in community – sharing together, mutual support, common aims – the challenge is to learn to live with a motley group of people, few of whom you would have chosen to share your life with
- It is a life under vows “no men, no money, and do as you are told”

Celibacy - freedom from close intimate relationships, so greater availability for generous loving service to wider range of people – witness to unselfish loving, challenges the assumption that a hectic sex life is essential to happiness!

Poverty – trying to live simply, sharing homes, expensive items, accounting for money spent, no personal income – challenges the assumption that material prosperity and the resultant fashionable lifestyle is all important

Obedience – living according to the rule and constitution and customs of the Order, obeying those in authority – system only works if generous obedience from all – challenges the assumption that I am happiest doing exactly what I please without considering anyone else

- It is a life in which worship and prayer are the heart, the foundation, the skeleton – brings in the spiritual dimension, challenging the assumption that we should focus all our attention on enjoying life in this world, this side of death
- It is a life in which love is expressed in service – of many kinds – outline – challenges the self-seeking, self-interested approach which is the norm
- It involves a commitment for life – challenges the assumption that nothing is or needs to be permanent, in an age of short term contracts and brief or superficial relationships

Religious life is not dull or boring – may be difficult, but often fun. Can be lots of variety

We want to make it more widely known, so women know it could be an option – don't want anyone to miss out on the opportunity of trying it – display, literature, week(end)

God calls each of us to something – leads us on in life – what challenge is he offering to you?

Sermon for village churches.

A sermon outline by Catherine CSC

Call and response

Ex. 19 – God calls a special people – reminds them of all his care for them, the way he has rescued them from slavery and danger.

In response he asks their loving obedience

He promises a covenant relationship – they will be his special possession

Mt. 9,35-10,8 – When Jesus becomes aware of the needs of the people around him – for the good news, for healing, for release from the power of evil, he responds by calling a group of men to help him in the ministry

Luke tells us that out of the crowd following him, Jesus chose 12 men

Mark tells us they were called to be with him and to be sent out. Being with him was very important – they needed that time to get to know him, to learn his ways, before going out

The Christian life is all about call and response. It is about God's greatness, and the wonder of his loving care for us, about Jesus dying that we might share his risen life – even while we were sinners (Rom 5) – about God's great love, and his call to us to respond to that love.

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Celibacy - freedom from close intimate relationships, so greater availability for generous loving service to wider range of people – witness to unselfish loving, sex not essential!

Poverty – trying to live simply, sharing homes, expensive items, accounting for money spent, no personal income – witness to fact that material prosperity is not everything

Obedience – living according to the rule and constitution and customs of the Order, obeying those in authority – system only works if generous obedience from all

- It is a life in which worship and prayer are the heart, the foundation
- It is a life in which love is expressed in service – of many kinds - outline
- It involves a commitment for life – a challenge in an age of short term contracts

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God calls each of us to something – leads us on in life – what is he saying to you?

The Religious life

A sermon outline by Janette OHP

Could this be for you? – The call to the Religious Life

Are you perhaps one of the many people who think that we saw the last of monks and nuns in the Church of England with the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII? If so, you need to think again. Admittedly there aren't too many of them around now in this part of the Anglican Communion – it's a different story in some of the developing countries – but you may not have to go too far to find a convent or monastery where you could find out more about such people and their life.

Many of the religious communities trace their history back to the second half of the nineteenth century, though others have been founded more recently. Strictly speaking, the terms “monk” and “nun” should only be used for members of the enclosed communities, for whom the life of prayer and worship is central and who do not normally engage in any form of ministry outside the monastery or convent. Not that these people are in chapel all day – like the rest of us, they need a balanced life. So woven into the framework of worship and prayer there will be time for study and for manual work. All will share as they are able in the practical duties of the house, and most will have their work in farm or garden, in craft workshop or studio, in office or library. These tasks will normally be carried out in silence, to promote an atmosphere conducive to the sort of prayer that is possible while body – and perhaps mind – are occupied. Thus the whole of life can become a prayer, not just the periods set apart for worship in chapel or for private contemplation or meditation. Intercession for the church and the world, with their many and varied needs, will have its place, so through their hidden life of dedication our monks and nuns form a powerhouse of prayer to support those engaged in active ministry or living out their Christian commitment in secular society.

The enclosed communities are few in number, by comparison with the other religious orders in our church. Many of these others were founded to respond to a specific need in church or society, such as education, social work among the poor and destitute, involvement in parishes, whether on a day to day basis or to conduct missions. In earlier generations our religious orders sought to reach out to and care for people with an amazing variety of different needs – prostitutes and delinquent girls, “gentlemen of the roads”, orphans, the frail elderly and the chronic sick, prisoners, lepers, the dying, to name but a few. They have worked among the poorest of the poor in the inner city parishes of the Victorian era, and have expanded their ministry overseas, spreading the Gospel, training local clergy, responding to the call for teachers, nurses and doctors, agriculturalists and other skilled workers in countries at an early stage of economic development. With hindsight, they may, like other Christians serving in the mission field, have made mistakes in their approach, but we can be sure that they went overseas with the best of motives, to express their love of God and to share their faith in him through meeting the practical needs of the people in the various parts of the world where they were called to serve. In the early days in particular they faced many difficulties and challenges; for service overseas brought serious health

problems, for a few even death. There is much to admire, whatever our views now about how to share the Christian faith with people of other cultures.

As time has gone on the world has changed beyond recognition. The pioneering work of the religious communities has drawn attention to problems within society; now others are working in these fields. Education and health care are now provided by the state, and many charitable organisations have been set up to meet the needs of groups with specific needs. This changing situation has meant that the religious communities have had to take a long hard look at themselves, and their options for the future. Some, having accepted that they have completed the ministry for which they were founded, have quietly faded from the scene. Others have found themselves called to a different form of outreach, and they have discovered increasingly that they are valued not so much as cheap labour but for the spiritual dimension they can bring into a variety of situations, not all obviously “churchy”. There is still a wide range of ministries carried out by members of religious orders, related to the needs of our own time rather than that of a former age.

But the outside ministry of religious (a term which covers both men and women, from any type of religious community) is by no means the most important aspect of their life. True, it is the outward expression of their love of God and others – but this fact of necessity makes it secondary. Those who come to the religious communities are usually drawn by the desire to commit their whole lives to God, and to express their love of him in prayer and worship. These are the essential elements in the religious life; prayer and worship will form the structure about which other aspects of the daily round are organised. Each community will have its own pattern; those which regard themselves as monastic will meet together in choir to sing or say the daily office. Some of the enclosed communities retain the traditional seven-fold office, such as is mentioned in the Rule of St. Benedict, so that every few hours they meet for formal prayer. This would be difficult for those engaged in active ministry, especially if outside the house; such communities usually have a fourfold office. Each day will begin with Lauds or Morning Prayer in chapel, and this may be followed by a Eucharist. Many religious houses have a daily Eucharist, though increasingly there is variation in the time of day when this is celebrated; midday or evening are other possibilities. There is normally provision for a period of personal prayer at the beginning of the day; God comes first, chronologically as well as in other ways. The other major office is Vespers or Evening Prayer, which comes in the early evening, when the main work of the day is over. To complete the pattern there is a coming together around lunch-time for a short Midday Office, and the day will be rounded off with the late evening office of Compline. Each community has its own form of the Divine Office, some closer to the traditional forms, others moving similar to those now authorised for general use in the Church of England. Every community has a unique history, tradition and ethos, and these will be expressed in the form of worship used. Most expect their members to gather in chapel for common worship, though a few merely require the office to be said, without regard to whether this is done corporately or on an individual basis.

Worship together is but one aspect of living in community. Those called into the religious life are called to live it in community with others – people they would never have chosen to be with, people of different ages, backgrounds, personality, churchmanship, spirituality. If you need a random sample of the population a religious community is a good place to start! Sharing with these others not only for worship but also for meals, for the daily domestic round, in active work and ministry, in fellowship and recreation – this can be a real challenge, which calls for a measure of personal maturity and the ability to make appropriate but satisfying relationships within this unusual context. The religious life is by no means an easy option for those who are overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle of life in the fast lane. Neither is it for those who are strong enough to manage alone (if any such exist); rather it is for those who appreciate their need of others for mutual encouragement and support on the journey of life.

Another challenge of the religious life comes with the aspect of commitment to the community for life, under the practice of the vows taken at profession. This is an awesome undertaking, especially in our own time when the idea of a life commitment, relatively common a couple of generations ago, is now almost incomprehensible. Those familiar with short-term employment contracts and re-training for new careers, with close personal relationships without the commitment of marriage vows, will find it difficult to conceive how anyone can make such a leap of faith. Taking life vows within a religious community is like taking a blank sheet of paper and writing at the bottom “Amen”, saying “so be it” to whatever may happen. Like marriage, it is “for better, for worse”, though this may not be said explicitly. The community will change – it changes, inevitably, with the addition of each new member! – and probably few within it will feel comfortable with all the changes. There is definitely an element of risk.

This being so, someone coming to explore the possibility of a call to a particular community will be given plenty of time to experience the life and to learn about that community and what membership of it entails. Anyone who after initial enquiries and a few visits wishes to take further a sense of call, will probably have the opportunity to live with the community for a period of perhaps a month; the title “aspirant” may be given to someone at this stage. If this extended visit results in the person wishing to enter the community, s/he will make arrangements to come for admission, in a simple ceremony, as a postulant. For a several months the postulant will share the life of the novitiate, taking part in the daily worship and work and in classes on different aspects of the religious life, gradually gaining experience of what it means to live in community. Towards the end of the time, if the postulant is satisfied that it would be right to continue with the community, s/he will apply to become a Novice. The application will be considered by the community; if accepted, the postulant will receive the habit of the order at a formal ceremony known as “clothing”, which normally takes place within the context of the Eucharist.

This opens the way to a further period, usually two to three years, in the novitiate, giving further opportunity for learning and for experiencing the religious life within this particular community. The training for novices will be based at the mother house, or head quarters of the community, but the novice may spend time at smaller branch houses of the order. Living in a small group can be even more challenging than living in a larger, more institutional, one – there are fewer places to hide, and personalities impinge, and may clash, more readily! Many religious spend much of their lives in branch houses, so it is wise to ensure that every novice has at least a little experience of such a situation before reaching the point of making a decision to go forward to a longer-term commitment.

Up to this stage the postulant or novice is entirely free to leave at any time if this seems right, but now things are about to change. If s/he still feels called follow this way of life, s/he will apply to the community for permission to take vows. In earlier days, it was the custom to make life vows on completion of the novitiate, but now commitment is usually made in two, or even more, stages. If the application is accepted by the community, the novice will probably take vows for an initial period, perhaps of three years. This is a definite commitment for the whole of this period; the vows are taken at a solemn ceremony, known as profession. Towards the end of the time in first profession, the religious will again need to take a decision about the future. On completion of the commitment s/he is free to leave the community, if it does not seem right to continue, or to apply to make a life commitment. There may also be the option to extend the period in first profession for a further limited time, probably for one, two or three years. Thus the time for testing a vocation to a religious community gives a person at least five or six, and possibly several more, years to experience and to learn about the life before reaching the crunch point of decision – to make a life commitment in this context, or to seek another path in following God’s call.

So what are these vows? They are usually three in number, referred to as poverty, celibacy and obedience, and encompassing every aspect of life. By poverty is meant not destitution, for most religious have all the basic material necessities for life – and sometimes rather more! Rather the ideal is a simplicity of life, with the emphasis on generosity and sharing of worldly goods, and a readiness to do without luxuries and inessentials. Religious are called to sit light to material possessions, witnessing to their unimportance in an age which is obsessed by them. Celibacy is far more than a promise to abstain from marriage and founding a family; rather it is the recognition that a person's primary relationship is with God through Jesus Christ. Refraining from deep intimate relationships with others sets the religious free to share God's love generously with a much wider range of people. The vow of obedience requires the religious to live in accordance with the Rule, Constitution and customs of the community, and to obey the leader or others exercising delegated authority. It implies a readiness to set aside one's personal likes and dislikes, and to a large extent giving up the freedom to organise one's own life. The needs of the community, and of others, must be paramount. The taking of vows comes at the initial commitment;; learning to live them will take all the years God gives!

Suppose this brief introduction has caught your interest, and you would like to know more – what next? Bearing in mind that every religious community has its own distinct ethos, and that God cannot possibly be calling you to more than one, the first thing is to get some basic information about them all, so that you can decide which might be right for you. The Anglican Religious Communities Year Book is published every two years; the current edition is dated 2002-2003; it is published by the Canterbury Press, Norwich; ISBN 1-85311-413-8. This book contains details of all the religious communities in the Anglican Communion, including their addresses and phone numbers, and in many cases their websites. The Yearbook has its own website, which can be found at <http://www.orders.anglican.org/arcyb/>

Once you have selected one or more communities which you feel drawn to, the best plan is to arrange for a visit. All religious houses exercise a ministry of hospitality, but they may do so in different ways; in some cases those who visit them are accommodated in a separate guest house, while others allow guests to share more fully in their own community life. When arranging a visit, it is advisable to check out what the arrangements are at the community you wish to stay with, so that your expectations are reasonably realistic. If you mention that you are tentatively exploring the possibility of a vocation to the religious life it should be possible for you to speak to the Novice Guardian, who will be able to advise you how to proceed. If the first community you visit does not feel right for you, remember that every one is different. If you still feel that God may be calling you in this direction, keep looking. Pray about it, talk with someone who knows you well and whose judgement you respect, preferably someone with some knowledge and understanding of the religious life. It is very easy to delude oneself – either that you have a religious vocation when you haven't, or more likely that you haven't when you have. If the sense of calling persists, do something! Test it out. If it is not right, this will become apparent. If it is, you will be embarking on a life which, though by no means easy, can bring you challenge and opportunity, joy and sorrow, and so much more. You will not be setting out alone, but in company with others, with mutual support and encouragement. If it is God's call to you, be thankful – he couldn't offer you anything better!