

April 16 & 17, 2019
St. Stephens, Petersburg, VA & St. Paul's, Suffolk
Holy Week Renewal of Ordination Vows (RCL/C)
A sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Isaiah 49:1-7
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
John 12:20-36
Psalm 71:1-14

Some of you will remember the late William Sloan Coffin. Clearly he was one of the most colorful and engaged Christian social reformers and activists of the 20th century. However, few know of the formative experiences that led to his ordination as a Presbyterian clergyperson and later as the pastor of the Riverside Church in Manhattan.

Right after graduating from high school Coffin became a student at Yale college. Becoming fascinated by the WWII need to fight and stop fascism in Europe, in 1942 he joined the Army serving as an intelligence officer. In the course of his work in the Army intelligence community Coffin functioned as a liaison to the Russian and French armies. In that work he heard countless personal stories of what it was like to live in Stalin's USSR. After the war he resumed his studies at Yale and later went to Union Theological Seminary. Then another war broke out in Korea. With his knowledge of military intelligence and then having a keen interest to fight communism, he became a CIA case officer for several years. Ultimately he went back to Union Seminary, finished his degree and was ordained as a Presbyterian minister.

Some years later in a sermon he was reflecting upon the effect of his rich life experience upon the decision to seek ordination. In the sermon he said that his first-hand experience of the unworldly brutality of war had been a prime motivating factor in his decision. He spoke about the "sullied stream of human life" that was a wake-up call to him; that the Christian faith that he had earlier in life dismissed as irrelevant had quite a task to do to bring parts of the Kingdom of God to bear upon the unruly wills of humanity. His views were particularly founded upon his experience of the ways in which human lives were so easily eliminated.¹

My guess is that at some point in Coffin's discernment because of his first-hand experience of man's inhumanity to mankind, he may have said something to the effect that, "Someone ought to do something about that." My experience is that such a statement is more than a little dangerous. If the speaker has even an inkling of spiritual bearing, the question frequently comes full circle to give voice to that well known dialogue between God and the prophet Isaiah, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And (Isaiah) said, 'Here am I; send me!'"²

¹ William Sloane Coffin, "Why I Became a Minister," A sermon preached at Riverside Church, New York, NY on October 5, 1986.

² Isaiah 6:8b, NSRV.

For most of us, that voice of God is what we know as calling to a vocation. Once you hear the calling what comes next?

As a Lenten discipline, I've been rereading a book written and published almost 50 years ago: What is Anglicanism by the late Urban T. Holmes. Urban, or "Terry" as he was known by his friends, was passionately committed to the foundations and underpinning of what it means to be an Anglican, and in particular what it means to be in Anglican holy orders.

Colleagues, as Anglican Catholic Christians, what about our ordination within this faith community distinguishes us? To what is the renewal of ordination vows oriented? Certainly to God: Father, Son & Holy Spirit. But there is more, more for our tribe of Anglican Catholic Christians in holy orders.

In an expansive explanation Terry Holmes set forth his thesis that the combination of reason, scripture and tradition happens to be our unique foundation. For decades and even centuries in the Isle of Britain this theological foundation was being formed by our spiritual ancestors. Culminating in the 16th century the foundation was expounded upon by Richard Hooker. Hooker's Anglican way walked between the doctrinal rigidity of Roman Catholicism and the individualistic scriptural certainty of the Puritans.

At the very center of our triad of faithful living is reason. Though in larger society reason is directly related to logic and analysis, there is more to our Anglican understanding of reason. We believe that God has given us the capacity to intuitively as well as rationally discover truth. Through reason we can understand and be committed to the scriptures. Out of our God-given reason our traditions flow.

By no means is the Anglican way of being Christian simple. Time and time again we find ourselves debating the tenets of our faith formation and expression. We will debate just about anything that can be debated that might range from the calculation of angels on the head of a pin to the Virgin birth. No, it's not simple. For many of us, me included, this approach to belief in Christ is the only tolerable and faithful way to be a Christian. Yet, as we know from our history, our approach and its implications has not always been acceptable to the often self-proclaimed religious authorities. Nevertheless, I have always thought it to be instructive that neither the guillotine nor the burning stake could silence this way of being a follower of Christ. If anything the actions that were intended to deter our Anglican Catholic Christian way have intensified it.

Lest we think this resistance is a phenomena relegated to the distant annals our Anglican history, think again. Just last week in this country a presidential hopeful was castigated by political pundits because he said that he was a Christian who expressed his faith within our church. His critics ignorantly staked their claim that because of their impressions about our way of being God's people, that a person could not simultaneously be Christian and be an Episcopalian. In other words, the two are mutually exclusive. One cancels the other.

Within this way of being Christian and Anglican, we are simultaneously challenged to wrap our minds and our souls around the striking words of Jesus about dying to one life so that we can live another in companionship with him:

“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.”³

These are the sacrificial risks Jesus asks us take for the sake of the God who loves us and the people whom we serve. Sacrificially risking ourselves, not just our money or our status, is the genuine risk of discipleship. God asks and calls us to make other people the focus of our sacrificial risk-taking. Pastoral and priestly work through relationships is the riskiest business around. Risking to love and serve, risking rejection and ridicule, risking despair for the promise of fulfillment -- those are the truly profound risks that God wants us all to take.

One night in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus acquiesced to his Father’s desire and sacrificed all of his own desires, he knew that as well – that there would be those who would see his death as merely one more execution of a criminal on Golgotha hill. Sacrifice is the humbling action of the spiritual leader. As Jesus told the Pharisee and the tax collector: “...all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Jesus is looking for his people, the people whom he loves. You and I are his arms, hands, feet, eyes and ears. We are essential. You and I are called to, as we prayed in the collect, “...gladly suffer shame and loss for the sake of (God’s) Son our Savior Jesus Christ...”

The spiritual leadership we take on in our ordained lives is hard work. Rarely, if ever, can this ministry be done by accident. Our work and ministry is done through absolute intentionality. You and I have been given the ministry of sacrificial spiritual leadership. We are called to be sacrificial servants for the sake of our Lord Christ. Sisters and brothers, lead on!

I now invite you to a time of contemplative silence as we prepare to renew our vows to be ordained servants of God.

³ John 12:24-26, NSRV.