

Les Jackson Ordination
August 13, 2011, St. John's, Odessa

On July 18, 1971, I stood in this pulpit for the first time, having just arrived as a priest on the staff of St. John's after completing my three year tour of active duty as a navy chaplain. And what a gracious welcome we found here. We were received by this parish with open arms and open hearts.

And now – 40 years and 26 days later – I find myself standing here again, as another new priest – or should I say very soon to be ordained new priest – becomes a part of this parish family. And Les, I suspect you are finding the same kind of welcome here that we found. You will be ministered to by these people of St. John's as much as you will minister to them. And that's the way it should be. But more on that later.

It's been quite a journey - Les - that has brought you to this moment. And I am glad that you have allowed me to be with you on at least a part of that journey.

Nearly 30 years ago – after considerable thought and prayer – you came to the conclusion that your Christian life might have a better chance of further developing in the Episcopal Church rather than the Baptist Church of your birth and upbringing. And so you allowed me the privilege of presenting you for confirmation at St. Christopher's, Lubbock.

Sometime after that you introduced me to your fiancée Valinda Bradshaw, and eventually the two of you gave me the honor of presiding at your wedding.

It took a bit more additional thought and prayer and wrestling on your part, Valinda, than it did for Les, but in time you also allowed me the privilege of presenting you for confirmation.

And as time passed and your family began to grow, the two of you gave me the honor of baptizing your two daughters, Amber and Brittany, as they came into this world.

Then Les you began to sense that the voice of God might possibly be calling you to a different ministry in the life and work of the church. As you sorted this out with the help of the church's discernment process, it proved to be a valid call, and so you began the diocese's deacon formation program; and, after completing it, in October 1999 you again allowed me the privilege of presenting you for ordination to the diaconate.

And now the voice of God has called you to a still different ministry, to which both you and the church have responded positively, and for which you have received seminary training. And so we gather here in this place – this morning – where you again give me the honor of standing in this pulpit and taking this part in your ordination to the priesthood.

There are two related questions that might be addressed at this time:

First, what is a priest?

Second, and what is the priesthood?

And as one who bears the wear and tear of 46 years in this office, I might try to answer them in this way:

What is a priest? Just another flawed, imperfect human being trying to serve God and God's people in a special way in Sacramental Ministry; and a person as much in need of God's grace and mercy and forgiveness as everyone else.

And what is the Priesthood? Well, it's not easy. It's not all fun and games. It's a lot of hard work that can drain a person in no time at all. But if persevered in, it is one of the most rewarding and fulfilling vocations to which a person can ever be called.

Our Prayer Book catechism reminds us that much of the ministry of the priest is no different from what is expected of everyone in the church. In its section on ministry it first asks:

Q. Who are the ministers of the Church?

A. The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.

It then follows with four questions and answers:

Q. What is the ministry of the laity?

Q. What is the ministry of a bishop?

Q. What is the ministry of a priest or presbyter?

Q. What is the ministry of a deacon?

And the answer to each of these questions begins in exactly the same way:

- It is to represent Christ and his Church.....

And then a final question is asked:

Q. What is the duty of all Christian?

A. The duty of all Christians is to follow Christ; to come together week by week for corporate worship; and to work, pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God.

These are the basic ingredients of priestly ministry, just as they are for all other ministries in the church; and in doing them you will be no different than all others in the church.

- To follow and represent Christ as a member of his Church;

- To participate weekly in worship;

- And to work, pray, and give for the spread of God's kingdom.

But the catechism goes on to list five other specific things a priest is charged to do in the life of the Christian community:

- To serve particularly as a pastor to the people;
- To share with the bishop in the overseeing of the Church;
- To proclaim the Gospel;
- To administer the sacraments;
- And to bless and declare pardon in the name of God.

Les, this is what you are being ordained to do this morning.

The Biblical roots of the concept of “priesthood” are in the covenant relationship God makes with his people. The Hebrew noun for priest is “**kohen**”, which is literally translated as “**one who stands**”.

A priest is one who stands before and between God and his covenant people performing the sacrificial or sacramental rites called for in that covenant relationship.

And to stand there – before God - before God’s people – and between God and his people – can be a tough place to be at times.

There is a bit of worldly advice that I suspect we have all heard at one time or another. I know I certainly heard it from my parents. **Try to stay out of the middle of things that aren’t of personal concern to you.** Or, as they phrased it, **keep your big nose out of other people’s business.**

But the commission that comes with ordination to the priesthood is just the opposite. **Get in the middle. Get in the middle of God and his people – and stay in that middle - because that’s where your work is – being there and being focused on God’s business – the business of reconciliation.**

To stand at that place before and between God and his people – being a Pastor - preaching the Word – proclaiming the Gospel – celebrating the Eucharist – pronouncing blessing and absolution in the name of God – this is the call - the vocation of priesthood. This is being “kohen”.

Someone once told me of an old tradition in parts of the Orthodox Church that should give pause for thought to anyone wanting to become a priest. **That tradition suggests that proportionately there are more priests in hell than any other single group – for those nearest holy things are also those in greatest peril of losing their souls.**

Thus priests have to be extremely responsible in how they handle those sacramental duties entrusted to them, to minimize that risk of losing their souls. The glory always goes to God, never to self.

Sometimes you discover very good theology in some unusual places, such as a couple statements I ran across many years ago; one in a T.V. Guide magazine that we used to subscribe to, the other in a U.S. News & World Report that I picked up one day while waiting in a doctor's office.

In the T.V. Guide article, Fr. Andrew Greeley, the Jesuit sociologist and novelist, was being interviewed since one of his novels – in which his priests are always fallible human beings - was being produced as a television movie. He said this about the priesthood:

“The hands of ordination do not change human nature. All they do is impart an obligation to dedicate one’s life to preaching the Gospel and healing human hurt; and to try harder to contend with the frailties of one’s own human nature. TRY HARDER, note well, does not mean ERADICATE COMPLETELY.”

And in the U.S. News & World Report article, Roman Catholic Bishop Matthew Clark of Rochester, New York was discussing how the role of the priest has changed from an authority figure to what he termed a **“fellow sojourner”**. He said the following:

“A priest who goes into a congregation thinking ‘I have exactly what these people need’ is on the wrong track. He rather needs to go in saying ‘I’ll give you what I have, and together we’ll struggle to be faithful in an imperfect world’.”

Remembering things like these can help a priest avoid the pitfalls the orthodox tradition warns about, and stay balanced and on the right track in priestly life and priestly ministry.

Les, you have served the church in this diocese as a deacon since 1999. At St. Christopher’s you have conducted and assisted in worship, preached, visited the sick and needy, and have shown an amazing capacity to love, care for, and minister to all people without exception. Your dedicated secular work over the years I have known you with those less fortunate than ourselves is something I have stood in awe and admiration of.

Now your home congregation of St. Christopher’s has raised you up - and this congregation of St. John’s has called you to serve them in a new role as priest – in which you will assume the additional responsibilities of pronouncing blessing and absolution in the name of God and presiding at God’s table in the celebration of his sacred meal.

And I would simply leave you with two comments that have been with the church for 16 centuries now, both made by St. Augustine, that remarkable North African Bishop of the fourth century. First, he said this:

“On the one hand, if the duties of the office of a bishop, or presbyter, or deacon, be discharged in a superficial and time-serving manner, no work in this life can be more easy, agreeable, and likely to secure the favor of men, especially in our day. But none at the same time more miserable, deplorable, and worthy of condemnation in the sight of God.

But on the other hand, if in the office of bishop, or presbyter, or deacon, the orders of Christ, the Captain of our salvation, be observed, there is no work in this life more difficult, toilsome, and hazardous, especially in our day. But none at the same time more blessed in the sight of God.”

Second, I will slightly rephrase the wording, because Augustine was talking about his ordination to the episcopate, but what he said applies equally to the priesthood.

“What I am FOR you terrifies me – what I am WITH you consoles me. FOR you, I am a priest – But WITH you I am a Christian. The former is a title of duty – the latter one of grace. The former is a danger – the latter is salvation.”

Les, all of this is in small part what it means to be a priest –to be “kohen” – as you respond to God’s call to take your place as one who stands firmly in the middle at that vital intersection where God meets the world and reaches his hand of salvation to the peoples of the world.

May God bless you as you undertake this new ministry.