

Someone tweeted on Monday 'the church has finally caught up with the 1950's'. They were of course referring to the vote by General Synod. It certainly was about time, and perhaps now Synod can get on with important business.

The press will inevitably go into the realms of fantasy speculating about who is going to be the first woman bishop and no doubt produce endless columns criticising the poor unfortunate first woman bishop on her dress sense or other such important theological considerations! Let's hope the church itself does not patronise women, as happens all too often in the political world, by appointing people just because they are women. We need a system where the best people are appointed regardless of gender, colour or class. That begs the question, how do you identify the best people? And what is the nature of vocation? Are some people called to be bishops? What does it mean to be called to a particular ministry? Are some people made bishops who are not called to that ministry and are some priests ordained who have no vocation?

I ask this in the light of the Pope's alarming claim that 1 in 50 catholic priests are paedophiles – and let's be honest, this is not a problem limited to the Catholic Church. There are many clerics from the Church of England in jail or facing trial, including the Bishop who confirmed me. That, you may say, is an extreme example of things going badly wrong, and yes, it is; but within the church there are also many others who behave in inappropriate, though perfectly legal, ways. Some are overambitious – career priests, who care more about their own reputation and career than about the people they serve. Some have become ministers to satisfy some need in themselves, a requirement to feel they are of value, and that too is dangerous, for it creates dependency and can lead to inappropriate relationships.

These I believe are the weeds among the wheat.

The church desperately needs men and women to train for ministry. It is a serious question as to how we foster vocation and at the same time ensure that we are not sowing weeds, storing up problems for later. So how do we ensure that the right people are appointed, whether as Bishops or any other kind of ministry?

If you apply to be ordained, there is a whole process that is meant to discern the nature of your calling, including a three day selection conference. The appointment of what are called Senior Leadership positions, is by interview. The Archbishops Appointments advisor will indeed advise, telling a person what steps along the way they need to do to get noticed and appointed. This sits very uneasily with the model of leadership that we get from Jesus. When I was in Oxford Diocese

they ran a very good course called servant leadership, which helped to identify that leadership could mean many things and be exercised in many ways, but the one and only model for those in ministry should be that of Jesus, the leader who served. So much of the gospels is taken up with Jesus railing against the religious hierarchies of his day, of the way in which they exploited their power, and abused their position. Have we no ears to hear what he says?

Ambition is not necessarily a bad thing, but we need to be aware of what are seeking. Is it money? There's not much of that in the church. Is it power? That is a dangerous thing unless accompanied by enormous wisdom. Is it influence? That too can be a two edged sword. Is it service? There are still some politicians who have a vocation to serve their country and people through parliament. It is a noble calling. Sadly, there seem to be far more career politicians. There are many good Parish priests who feel called to serve. But there are some who either never had or who have lost their sense of calling.

This is something that the church has to address. Making women Bishops is great, I am delighted, but it really only matter if the whole environment in which vocation is considered is re-evaluated.

We need priests, and Bishops, we need Readers and Pastoral Assistants, we need youth workers, we need church wardens and people to serve on Synod – but not just anybody, we need people who have a real vocation to do this.

You, some of you, have a vocation to ministry. How do you know if that is true?

Because it will terrify you but you will know deep down that it is something you have to do. It is frightening because when you sign up for ministry it is not the same as being a volunteer with a uniform. As a volunteer you can walk away at any time. You can dictate what you will and won't do. As a Priest or a Bishop or in any kind of ministry, you have to learn to love people who are difficult, you can't pick and choose, and it is for life. It is like a marriage. And like a marriage, when it is right, you know that it is the only way you can live, even though there may be frustrations and annoyances, differences of opinions and sometimes rows.

There is a rottenness at the core of the church that allows people to be in ministry who care more for themselves than for the people they are supposed to be serving. Sometime this causes enormous harm, as in the case of paedophile priests. Sometimes it is just irritating. But there is only one way in which we will rid the church of this rottenness, of the weeds amidst the wheat, and that is by good people offering themselves for ministerial training, people brave enough to risk testing their vocation. People who will challenge the status quo, who will value holiness above ambition, who will question the hierarchies, people who are full of the joy of Christ, who value purity.

Not perfect people. None of us is perfect. But people who know what holiness might look like and admire it in others even if they cannot attain it themselves.

In the words of the post-communion prayer:

Grant, O Lord, we beseech you,  
that the course of this world may be so peaceably ordered  
by your governance,  
that your Church may joyfully serve you in all godly quietness;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.