

SOUTHWARK ORDINATION COURSE

TENTH ANNIVERSARY

Sermon preached in Southwark Cathedral, September 25, 1970,
by the Rt Revd J.A.T. Robinson, D.D., Dean of Trinity College,
Cambridge, and Chairman of the Council.

We are here tonight to celebrate what Winston Churchill called 'the end of the beginning'. It is a moment of deep thankfulness. What was conceived now eleven years ago, and born ten, was an act of considerable risk and faith. In the euphoria of the moment - and in 1959 there were many false dawns - we had no idea what the response would be. I guessed perhaps an apostolic dozen. When we had ninety enquiries for a maximum of thirty places we realized something had hit us - and the venture of taking on Wychoft was the result. But it could so easily have been a flash in the pan. Even in my short ministry I have seen numerous little ordination schemes mushroom and die. But against the swing (as the politicians would say) the Southwark Ordination Course seems to have established itself as a pattern of the future - someone even said to me last week from America 'the only pattern which has much future'. That I don't believe. But at least it is being closely studied and imitated. But if it is to meet the needs of the next ten years it must be a moving pattern. Tonight, as I have said, marks the end of the beginning, and as the Course enters its temperamental teens it will be under new management, in which we all have the greatest confidence.

But now for a moment we stop to look back and say thank you. And as I look back I think first of those who were there at the beginning and who are still here. First, Mervyn our Bishop and president tonight, to whose vision and initiative the whole thing goes back - and as the Course bursts its original diocesan boundaries (without I am glad to say losing its diocesan birth-name) we shall soon be welcoming him again as our Visitor. Then there is Gordon Davies, the only man to have been on the staff continuously from the beginning - thank you, Gordon, for all you have been and have done. I cannot forbear to mention from this pulpit another of the original band, whose name is permanently inscribed on this preaching desk - George Reindorp. What moments of hilarity we had sifting some of the more colourful applicants! Then, as soon as his departure released her, if not before, we grabbed Benedicta as our first, and only, Registrar. What the Course owes to her in terms of faithfulness, friendship and finance will never properly be assessed - or to John Smallwood, our ten-year treasurer, who has seen us through without a single deficit - even if the balance was once, if I remember rightly, £1! I cannot begin to name all who have served the Course on its council, in its class-rooms, in its office (and in the University office), and not least at its tables - though again from this pulpit I am sure you would like me to say a warm word in his absence to Frnie, who often deputized

for me as chairman and whose friendly breath I can feel down my neck now! But I must commemorate and celebrate its principals and vice-principals - Stanley Evans (laus deo), Frank Colquhoun and Jack Vyse (the last with us for the last time tonight). Time would not allow and modesty forbids me to speak personally about each. Let me just say this collectively. The theological seminary (and the word simply means 'seed bed') has been called the avant garde of the Church. If it is to train for the future it must live in the future. And S.O.C. has been out ahead of much in the Church of England. Yet it has also been one of the few things pioneered in this diocese over the past decade that has not divided either the high and low or (perhaps more remarkably) the left and right. That is enormously to the credit above all of the principals, but also of the maturity of both staff and students.

But my job tonight from this pulpit is not to lead a round of self-congratulation. It is to preach the Gospel. So, briefly now, in the time left, I should like to focus your thoughts on that Gospel we have just heard from John 21. 1-19. It is one of those timeless stories, marvellously distilled and recollected in tranquility, which is nevertheless peculiarly a parable for our time - and indeed for our Course - of the conditions of Christian presence and Christian ministry.

Simply note three points:

(1) The Christ comes to a group of men - a small and intimate group - faithfully about their daily work. 'Simon Peter said, "I am going out fishing". "We will go with you", said the others'. And by that he didn't mean what the Bishop of Southwark means when he asks the Archdeacon of Lewisham to go fishing with him! It was more like 'Back to the old grind'. There was no glamour - yet this was the condition of any revelation or ministry.

(2) They spent all night catching nothing and seeing nothing. Anyone who has been in the priest-worker ministry in particular knows there are no quick returns. The expectations of meeting and of ministry are not built-in as they are in the parochial context. They have to be prepared and awaited in patience. And when they come it is often in the most unlikely openings - in this case a business tip from a stranger on the touch-line. Recognizing Christ means being able to see him in the incognito. And the condition of ministering is often the humility to accept being helped - listening to advice however improbable, and adding your fish to someone else's fry. And then, to the prepared mind, the transforming disclosure can come: 'It is the Lord!'. And we can say of our very ordinary, familiar spot: 'The Lord is in this place, and I knew it not'.

(3) And then, thirdly, comes the transition from meeting to ministry. It starts with an unexpected question. 'After breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than all else?" ' 'Of course, you know I do', he replies in a 'Why do you need to ask?' sort of tone. But Jesus says it again - and then again - till not unnaturally Peter resents the reiteration. But do we really stay to listen to this question addressed to ourselves? It's so easy in the ministry to say 'But

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you know I do'. Ministering, like doctoring, seems self-authenticating. But it isn't - or it soon becomes a means of authenticating self, choosing our niche to make our contribution. We can go on in any other job - including, as I know, an academic job - without ever facing this question. But we can go on in the ministry only if we really sit under it - and let it be put to us year after year: 'Do you love me more than all else?'. And Christ's response is the unexciting one 'Feed my lambs', 'feed my sheep'. And even that we have subtly distorted to our own professionalism, so that the 'pastoral' relationship now sounds paternalistic. Feeding sheep, and even more feeding lambs, evokes the image of giving them milk out of bottles. No doubt that is occasionally necessary, in an emergency. But, normally, feeding sheep means giving them nothing. The word used means allowing them pasture, that is freedom to feed themselves. 'The hungry sheep look up' we are told 'and are not fed' - and we see ourselves commissioned to hand stuff out to them. But they should be told to look down rather than up, at the grass at their feet, and we to see they are not shut out of it.

The conditions of Christian presence and Christian ministry are continually changing (and never more than at this hour): yet they are also remarkably constant - 95% perspiration, 5% inspiration; the prepared mind; the stripped body (corporately as well as individually); and above all the love that never lets go but also sets free.

These, I am persuaded, have been marks of S.O.C. during its first ten years and, if I may humbly say so, pre-eminently of its first two principals, so different (yet perhaps no more different than Peter and John), nevertheless so similarly constant in their dedication. And perhaps of the Course we may go on to hear the words 'When you were young you fastened your belt about you and walked where you chose' - those were salty, pioneering days - 'but when you are old you will stretch out your arms, and a stranger will bind you fast, and carry you where you have no wish to go'. But if that stranger be still the same one by the Galilean sea, we have no need to fear. Listen afresh to Schweitzer's haunting words based on this passage: 'He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, he came to those who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He Is'.
