



The Yoke We Share
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Year A, Advent 1

Isaiah 2:1-5, Matthew 24:36-44

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An old friend once sent me an article along with a note suggesting that it was high time I come clean about why I became a priest. The article referenced a book by Kevin Dutton titled *The Wisdom of Psychopaths: What Saints, Spies and Serial Killers Can Teach Us About Success*. In this book the author attempts to dispel some myths about psychopaths as they are often portrayed in Hollywood movies. It is his contention that while psychopaths can be extremely dangerous, there are also many highly functioning psychopaths who enjoy great success in our world today.

Now I'm aware that many of us don't entirely know what a psychopath actually is. The essential quality that most people possess but is lacking in a psychopath is empathy. Empathy is the ability to place ourselves in another person's position and imagine what they might be experiencing. This is an important skill, as empathy is often what stops us from treating other people badly.

To make this point clearer, I'm going to ask you to imagine a scenario. A train is hurtling down the tracks out of control. If it keeps heading on its current path, it will collide with a group of five people, killing all of them. However, you are standing next to a switch. If you flick the switch, the train will be diverted. Unfortunately, the train is still out of control and will now collide with only one person, killing them. What do you do?

It's a no-win scenario. While it pains most of us to think of this dire event, most of us will flick the switch, psychopaths included. But what if we change the story just a little? This time the train is hurtling out of control again toward a group of five people. This time you don't have a switch that will divert the train. Instead, there is a very tall person

standing in front of you. If you push this person into the path of the oncoming train, they are large enough to stop the train, saving the other five people. Will you push this person in front of the train?

Hopefully this second story gives you a slight knot in your stomach. That knot is a good thing. We know that the cost of one person's life in order to save five others is exactly the same in both stories, but there is something far more unpleasant about the second story. The problem is that in the second story we are more acutely aware of the consequences of sacrificing someone by pushing them onto the tracks. The fact that this person is right there in front of you, not off in the distance, means that we become far more aware of the experience of the person who is being sacrificed to save others. Our experience of empathy is stronger in the second scenario.

The response of a psychopath, a person without empathy, is a little different. Such people see no difference between the first story and the second story. For them, flicking the switch and pushing the person are exactly the same thing. The psychopath is only interested in the result and cares little about how the result is achieved.

Now the reason my friend sent me that article about psychopaths, was because it also contained a list of the ten jobs most likely to attract a psychopath. Number one on the list of jobs was CEO or company director, closely followed by lawyers at number two. Number three are media personalities. I'm sure we can all think of at least one media personality who displays a lack of empathy. Anyway, number eight on the list reads: clergy person.

So why would psychopaths find it so enticing to become a clergy person? Looking at the list of professions most likely to attract psychopaths, I began to think about the common traits among them. All are positions of authority and come with status. In fact all of the jobs on that list—clergy person included—have a high degree of influence and power.

When it comes to being a clergy person, power is a difficult subject. The simple truth is that there is power that comes with the job. Failure to acknowledge that truth often causes big problems. Yet, for

those who are truly striving to live a life based on the example of Christ, there is a temptation to try and claim that we are only servants of the people and have no real power of our own. Sadly, it is not that simple.

One of the important lessons coming from the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care, is that our institutional failure to acknowledge power dynamics created a climate in which abuse occurred with alarming regularity. Today, to take on the role of clergy person, is to share some of the responsibility for that terrible history, and to live out this vocation in such a way that such abuse cannot and does not happen again. More care needs to be taken in discerning who and who cannot become leaders in the church. In recent years psychological profiling has become part of that process, with the hope that while those who might abuse power could be attracted to the job, they do not get the job. Such discernment requires the greatest of vigilance.

Yesterday we celebrated a moment which was not so much about someone getting the job, but rather a moment when the church recognized the gifts of a particular person. In addition to the duty of care I have just mentioned, the church as a whole bestowed many responsibilities upon Grace. It's quite a list. If you didn't hear it at yesterday's ordination service, it went something like this:

"Priests in the Church are called to build up Christ's congregation, to strengthen the baptised, and to lead them as witnesses to Christ in the world. To do this they are called to be pastors. They are to share people's joys and sorrows, encourage the faithful, recall those who fall away, heal and help the sick."

But wait, there is more: "Above all they are to proclaim God's word and take their part in Christ's prophetic work, to declare forgiveness through Jesus Christ, to baptise, to preside at the Eucharist, to administer Christ's holy sacraments."

That is pretty overwhelming. But there is some reassurance. A few weeks ago during one of our liturgy workshops I spoke about the symbol of the stoles clergy wear. When people are ordained as deacons they wear their stole to the side. The symbolism of this is that it represents a towel. This is a reminder that as deacons they are called to the service of others.

Yesterday when Grace was ordained as a priest, we took her stole and placed it across her shoulders. The stole in this position represents a yoke. It reminds us of the verse in Matthew chapter 11 where Jesus says: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." The metaphor Jesus used was that of two oxen yoked together. Jesus is inviting us to share the yoke he is already wearing. The burden is not ours alone. In all that we do in ministry, Christ is beside us sharing the burden.

Ordinations are far from the only occasion when the church has bestowed responsibilities on people. During confirmation services, when bishops lay their hands upon people, they ask God to empower them to bring life into the world. That's a pretty hefty responsibility given to all who are confirmed. In fact, that particular responsibility is given to all who have been baptised. Or dare I go even further and suggest that God calls every human being to bring life into the world.

Today, is the first day of Advent, the first day of a new year in the life of the church. It is a new year's day, a day for new beginnings. Today is a day when we can all start again. And today is a day when Grace begins a new part of her life as a priest in this community, as a priest in the world. So, let us look to this new year with tenacious hope, a thirst for justice, a trust that God's love is alive and transforming this world through each choice we make. **Amen.**