

JOHN B TAYLOR

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# Purple Reflections: Life as an Evangelical Bishop

**John Taylor gives us an insight into the life and work of a bishop. From the process of selection, through appointment and into the daily work, he makes clear how much he regarded the pastoral office as being of the essence of the episcopal task. His account is laced with personal reminiscence, and he encourages a constituency which has sometimes been suspicious of bishops *per se* to give them the prayerful support they need to fulfil their ministry.**

## From the inside

My purpose in writing this article is to put on paper, for the benefit of those who are not yet bishops or may never become bishops, what it is like to experience episcopacy from within. It is relatively easy for people to look at bishops from the outside, to assess their achievements – or lack of them – and to discuss the rationale of episcopacy from a theoretical point of view, even from a biblical one. It is much harder to know what it feels like to go through the daunting process of selection (though mercifully one is not usually aware of that aspect of the procedure), invitation, decision, consecration and exercise of episcopal ministry, as only bishops experience it. Added to that is the undeniable fact that human beings cover up their conscious inadequacies by all kinds of private stratagems, from stiff upper lip to a show of pomposity, and rarely let their defences down so as to allow outsiders to know what they are really going through. Bishops are no exception to the general rule. So what is really going on?

I can only speak for myself, others will have a different story to tell, I had been a vice-principal of a theological college, a vicar of a large parish combined with the diocesan post of Director of Ordinands, and then an archdeacon. In an act of pure folly I opted to continue as DDO while also serving as Archdeacon of West Ham, on the ground that I would at least know a bit about one half of the job while I was trying to learn what an archdeacon was supposed to do. But in the end I learnt to value the experience of being an archdeacon, not only for its own sake (a pastoral ministry with a practical slant) but for the lessons it gave me in how to get things done in the Church of England. The bishop may lead the diocese, but the archdeacons have to see to the nuts and bolts. If they had an heraldic symbol, it ought to be an oilcan.

It was when the letter came from Downing Street that all this, by now just about manageable, world was turned upside down. It was totally unexpected and the only word I can think of to describe the feeling was that I was traumatised. I was gripped with fears, mainly of being a disastrous failure after Robert Runcie's undeniable success at St Albans. It affected my health and my sleep, and not even a satisfactory medical examination, which Downing Street insisted on, allayed the appalling sense of apprehension and foreboding. Here was I, brought up in the evangelical world of the IVF, Oak Hill, the Keswick convention and Simeon's Trustees, being launched upon a diocese with at least four generations of Tractarian bishops over the previous sixty years of its history. What would the clergy and people of the diocese think of me, and how ever would I cope?

Donald Coggan was kindness itself. He said to me: 'Look at it this way. You are going to be a kind of vicar to three hundred or so other vicars. That's not too unbearable a prospect, is it?' It helped, and I wrote back to Margaret Thatcher and said yes. The slow process got under way.

## **Becoming**

Becoming a bishop comes in several distinct stages and each stage has its own theological justification. The first is the process of election or nomination by the Crown Appointments Commission to the Prime Minister. It is fashionable in some quarters to decry this, but it does represent almost complete control on the part of the Church over the appointment of its diocesan bishops, and that needs to be set against the former practice of selection solely by the Prime Minister after only such consultations (and the inevitable lobbyings) as he chose to make. For me it was important that the invitation came not because I had friends in Parliament or clubland (for I had none) but because a group of trusted senior churchmen and women, clerical and lay, who included four elected representatives from the diocese of St Albans, had come to the conclusion after prayer, discussion, consultation and more prayer, that I might possibly be the person whom God was calling to be their bishop. I still cannot understand why, but that is of the nature of God's call to his servants. We always say, 'Why me?' and we are never given a satisfactory answer.

The announcement in the Press, after nearly four weeks of nail-biting silence and secrecy, broke the tension and gave rise to an avalanche of mail, nearly all friendly. There was delight from friends, congratulations from Chelmsford colleagues, cautious welcoming from St Albans clergy who must have wondered what ever was coming their way. Then there was the formal capitular election, when the Dean and Canons of St Albans duly elected me as their Bishop (they had little choice!). The ceremony which is virtually redundant now but is justified by some on the ground that it is the Church's last remaining vestige of protection against an unscrupulous Prime Minister who might break the conventions (for that is all they are) and appoint someone not approved by the Crown Appointments Commission. It could happen, or so they say.

Finally there came the moment of consecration in Westminster Abbey when I was asked whether I believed that as far as I knew my own heart God had called me to the office and work of a bishop in the Church. My feelings said no; it was

all a great mistake; they could not have known what I was really like inside. By all the subjective criteria of divine guidance, I would have preferred to be somewhere else. But God's call, I had to learn, is not necessarily what I would like to do or what I feel myself cut out for; it comes through the Church, and unless there is real cause to say no, the only proper response is to submit. Article 23 has something to say on these lines. So in that spirit I said, 'I believe that God has called me.' But where would the grace come from?

The service of Consecration was a deeply impressive affair, one of the first occasions when the ASB Ordinal for a Bishop was used. It spoke dramatically to the large congregation and to me. Here were the bishops, gathered round their chief provincial pastor, praying down the Holy Spirit upon 'your servant John for the office and work of a bishop in your Church'. It was this which transformed a priest into a bishop, both outwardly, for the candidate changes his robes in the course of the service, and also inwardly, because the consecrand senses the change in his own inner consciousness. That, at any rate, was my experience. The confidence returned, the fears were under control; the Lord seemed to be on my side in a new way, and many of his people were, I knew, rooting for me. It was an uplift that was sorely needed at the time.

I still had to face the removal vans and then the preparations for the enthronement in St Albans Cathedral, and learning all about the new diocese and its vast number of clergy, readers, NSMs and other lay ministers. I would gladly have traded in the gift of tongues (which anyway I had not been given) for the gift of being able to memorise names and faces, but apparently that doesn't come in the Spirit's catalogue of *charismata*. I had to work hard, with the diocesan directory always in my hand and the constant promptings of my suffragans readily available.

Evangelicals always worry about what to wear, partly because in the past we have made an issue of not wearing stoles at ordination and not wearing eucharistic vestments when under pressure to do so from others who think they are of the essence of the sacrament. Canon B.8 on the 'de-doctrinising' of ecclesiastical vesture has helped a lot, but nevertheless what you wear or do not wear does constitute something of a badge of identity, to others if not to oneself. I followed the policy of fitting in with the expectations of the parish at parish events, for not to have done so would have been saying that I wanted to distance myself from them, and wearing cope and mitre, as a kind of middle ground, at deanery or diocesan services. It had the merit of consistency and a touch of logic, but probably most of the people could not have cared less – though there were always the few who were puzzled if the mitre was missing, as if you had turned up in a lounge suit to a black tie dinner.

## Being

While the process of becoming a bishop has its stresses and strains, being a bishop is the real test of whether God's call was genuine and His grace is sufficient for every need. As with every minister's calling, the basic need is for an ordered life of prayer. For me this meant the morning (I am incapable of staying awake for more than a couple of minutes at night) and it meant a joint time of devotions

with my wife rather than going over to spend it apart from her in the cathedral, though often enough we had to get up extra early to fit this in before I went off to celebrate at an early service in some deanery or other. Without this our marriage and my ministry, indeed our ministry, would have creaked alarmingly. It was the one way we could spend quality time together. We read the Bible together; we prayed over the needs of the clergy and their families, their parishes and their vicarages; we prayed for those we had been with the previous day and those we would meet in the coming day; we prayed for grace in coping with the unexpected, the crises that would blow up in our faces, when we had the least time and energy to handle them; we braced ourselves for the new day. I used to say that I began every day as a bishop feeling apprehensive and I ended every day with a sigh of relief and thankfulness at having got through it, I don't know why I didn't end up with an ulcer. Perhaps that is where God's grace came in.

The bishop's ministry is exercised on three planes, if you follow the Cameron Report on *Episcopal Ministry* (Church House, London 1990): the local, the universal and the historical. The local is the diocesan, which occupies most of the bishop's time and energies. The universal refers to his relationship with his fellow-bishops worldwide, and the historical looks back to the line of episcopal succession which links him with the Apostolic Church. All three aspects are critical and they intertwine with each other. The bishop is much more than his own diocese's chief pastor. He is a bishop in the whole Church of God who is for the time being located in a given diocese. To the worldwide church his diocese gives him his local justification, but at the same time to his diocese his membership of the wider college of bishops gives him more than a purely geographical dimension. One can take this further and say that his office and authority as a bishop derive a special quality from the historical plane too, for he is in a line of apostolic faith, teaching and communion since the days of the NT Church. This does not depend on a verifiable tactile succession from hand to hand all the way back to the first century AD, but it does represent a recognisable continuity with the Apostolic Church, its gospel, its ministry, its doctrine and its fellowship running back to the Acts of the Apostles, and to which today's bishop is the heir.

In practical and personal terms this is experienced horizontally through membership of the House of Bishops, a remarkably tangible and supportive fellowship, and the occasional Lambeth Conference. This great gathering provides a bonding between bishops which goes on long after they have all returned to their own countries and dioceses. It is experienced vertically through history by virtue of the immense privilege we have in the Church of England through our historic buildings, which can turn out to be physical reminders in stone of all that has gone before.

This threefold dimension of the bishop's role, which is surely in accord with the NT Church, built upon the past, stretching out in unity with fellow-believers elsewhere but located as God's own people in a given locality, can be readily misunderstood today. We can accept 'our bishop' who has a responsible job caring for the flock, teaching, pastoring, preaching, licensing and exercising much-needed oversight in this 'our diocese'. However, he is often criticised for becoming too

readily 'one of them', that group of assorted colours who together make up the bishops of the Church of England. By no means all are evangelical, and if you were to believe what you read in the papers, you would come away with the idea that some of them were highly political and scarcely Christian in some of their views. That of course says a great deal about what the papers regard as newsworthy. Many a time I have wrung my hands at being quoted for one isolated sentence in a sermon, when the remaining 99% has been pure gospel, but in the eyes of the media that is 'not what our readers want to hear'. It is only the controversial, the political, the accidental that gets picked up and quoted, because those are what sell newspapers. A bishop speaking the truth of Christ's gospel means nothing to them. So I can appreciate that bishops collectively can easily be made out to be a pretty heterodox lot, but if you listen to them at their prayers or sharing their inmost thoughts, you soon realise that they are men of faith and dedication: yes, and sanctity too. Yes, they have their different traditions, some catholic, some evangelical, some radical, some traditional, some charismatic, and of course we disagreed among ourselves over a number of issues, but I have never had cause to doubt any brother-bishop's faith, only to admire it and be drawn to them in bonds of Christian affection. That is the unseen aspect of the horizontal relationship between those called into the ranks of bishops in God's church.

If I was asked to be biblical, I suppose it is this factor which most closely parallels the Church of the NT. Then the church was much more than a loose collection of isolated congregations, each with its own locally grown ministry of deacons and elders. The glue which held the churches together were the travelling, apostolic leaders, who founded congregations, pastored them from afar, appointed or assisted in the appointment of local elders, kept the churches in touch with each other, raised gifts from one church to give them to another, reminded them of their inheritance, wrestled with the frontier problems of theology and morality, occasionally exercised the ministry of discipline, moved around encouraging, inspiring and teaching. Without them the Early Church would soon have fragmented, and even with them it was hard enough to maintain the unity of the church. The tendency to isolation and parochialism was always there, as it is today. I would never commit myself to the belief that today's bishops are the direct descendants or successors of the apostles, for the apostles had a quality of uniqueness about them, but they do fulfil many of the old apostolic functions and they are a potent source of benefit for the Church as a whole.

## **Belonging**

Of course, the value of our bishops as individuals is just as important as their value as an institution, and it is as individual Christians that they are often judged for better or for worse. I would want to say quite bluntly that, as so often in parish life with vicar and people, it is the diocese that makes the bishop. A supportive, praying, appreciative diocese lifts not only the spirits of their chief pastor but also the quality of his performance as their bishop. Someone said to me only the other day, after I had preached a particularly difficult sermon, 'Well done – ooh, I shouldn't say that to a bishop, should I?' I said, 'Say it as often as you like!' Vicars who are occasionally

complimented on their preaching or thanked for what they do will invariably raise their sights and do their work with greater enthusiasm, and so it is with the bishop. And here the evangelical bishop is particularly vulnerable. Those of his own tradition are more inclined to see his faults, to notice where he has moderated his ways for the sake of the unity of the diocese or to show his respect for fellow-Christians of another tradition, and they are quick, sometimes appallingly quick, to condemn. Worse still, they know just how to put the boot in. One dear brother wrote to me more in sadness than in anger: 'Dear Bishop, I was so looking forward to hearing you preach on Sunday but this was not the John Taylor that I used to know!' I forget what it was I did that displeased him: I think it was that I spoke at an ecumenical service in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity about the current state of church unity, whereas he was expecting me to preach the gospel for decisions, as he had known me do in the past. So, another evangelical bishop was discarded, and I felt more deeply hurt than perhaps I should have done. But the truth is that it rankled for days.

Most of the time, however, the work of a bishop is deeply rewarding. You can teach the faith, you can inspire and instruct the faithful (and how they love to be taught!), you can help them to personal commitment as they make their confirmation vows, you can affirm the clergy in their front-line tasks and you can meet those outside the church who invite you to speak to them on their own home ground just because you are a bishop. Those frontier opportunities I used to accept by return of post; it was like being a missionary bishop at last. Every event was a challenge, whether undertaken in a parish among friends or in a public place before a critical audience, and the sense of apprehension never left me, even after fifteen years in the job. Those initial fears subsided and were replaced by a sense of privilege and the responsibility of the task of caring for the people of God and of trying to lead them closer to him. The more I look back, the more I am convinced that there must be such a thing as the grace of consecration, and I suspect it all began that day in May 1980.

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