

## **The Revd Canon Professor Mark D. Chapman**

Vice Principal Ripon College, Professor of the History of Modern Theology,  
University of Oxford, Canon Theologian of Truro

One of my favourite religious pictures is a photograph by Jane Bown of a 13 year old boy called Carl Campbell which was taken on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1965. It is quite a striking image – the teenager is sitting on a chair looking rather anxious and embarrassed in the way that 13 year olds do. And the reason for this anxiety is simple – the chair is a bishop's throne and the boy is dressed in the finest Episcopal robes – cope and mitre and crozier. He had been installed, so the caption read, for a month to perform some of the bishop's duties. It didn't say precisely what these duties were – I imagine there weren't too many ordinations or confirmations, and I doubt whether he was expected to preach. But perhaps the only duty he really needed to perform was simply to sit on the throne.

Looking at the image of an adolescent dressed in the silly clothes of a bishop might make us laugh – but that little bit of laughter might be more important to our faith than all the splendours of the real bishop dressed in the same clothes. Our faith needs to embrace laughter. But the church has always had a habit of taking itself a bit too seriously, and ceremonies like the boy bishop were rather threatening to its outward appearance as a serious religious institution – and that is why Elizabeth I had the whole thing banned. She was never a great defender of anarchy.

There was another festival that used to be kept, particularly in France, during the middle ages, around about 1<sup>st</sup> January. It was called the Feast of Fools, and to the insider it could look quite blasphemous – toasts might be drunk with communion wine, and a great deal of tickling of bishops and court flunkies seems to have taken place. The main culprits seem to have been the sub-deacons, which may be why the order was eventually abolished. But as with boy bishops, the Church couldn't cope with such mockery – and the feast was condemned in no uncertain terms by the Council of Basel in 1435.

In these feasts there is a strange reversal of roles – if only for a few days there was a real reversal of roles, a real opportunity for the church to laugh at itself and its pretensions. And that is right and proper. But it is also very hard to do – vast amounts of energy are expended on arguing over the words of our services, over parish shares, over mission action plans and all the day to day business of being a religious institution. In this diocese you will soon be appointing a new diocesan bishop – which means there will soon be new strategies and plans.

And as I have discovered from recently being elected to General Synod, there are seldom, if ever, any laughs.

But the sort of laughter that I am talking about is not the laughter we get from telling a good joke. Rather it is the laughter we get from looking at our church, looking at ourselves with the eyes of the outsider, and even with the eyes of God. And if we do that we are unlikely to take ourselves too seriously. It is like holding up a mirror to disclose the reality of who we are. Now, I can look in the mirror and see a bald little man with pretensions to be a theologian, and pretensions to know about God and his dealings with the world. And I know that if I were to take my own abilities too seriously I could easily be heading for a fall.

All of us – including Michael your new priest – have to look in a mirror and think about how God sees us. We look in the mirror and see not just ourselves, but people whose identity has been recast in the image of God. We end up looking at something a bit like the image of the boy bishop. That embarrassed, innocent and anxious image of a thirteen year old boy – and that will put everything else, into their proper perspective. For all those entrusted with ministry in the church it is crucial that keep this image in our minds.

As we keep the feast of St Peter let us reflect for a moment on that great confession of faith we had as the Gospel reading, where he cries out: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God”. He has looked at the face of Jesus and seen beyond; he has seen him as God sees him, as the one in whom God is present. He can see beyond all his presuppositions about what God must be like. Peter sees beyond and finds the God he has been looking for. And for that reason Jesus entrusts him with the power of forgiveness. But what happens just after the passage we heard? Everything suddenly turns sour: Jesus says to Peter “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men”. His presuppositions about how it must be, that Jesus could not possibly suffer, have got in the way. It is as if Peter’s own reflection covers the face of God in Christ. And if Peter is the model for discipleship then we need to keep both these aspects in mind. The one entrusted with the keys of heaven is the one who proves inept and in the end he even denies his Christ three times. And that is because he takes himself and his own presuppositions and ideas too seriously. Peter becomes the fool cannot laugh at himself.

And for all those entrusted with ministry in the church Peter must be our example. We have been given the authority to forgive, but that authority is God’s alone. Like Peter, priests are called to look beyond themselves to help people find God. And they will only be able to do this if they can see the face of a child in the mirror, if they can search for what lies beyond.

I know that Michael will be surprised to have made it to this day – we journeyed together for the past few years, and had many laughs. And this morning he may well have stood before the mirror, laughed, and wondered whether it was for real. For much of his career he was used to dressing up and looking in a mirror, and now he is doing it again; but he is doing so as someone who looks through the mirror to the other side. Today is the first time he has pronounced absolution, celebrated the eucharist, and given the blessing. And I'm sure adrenalin will be coursing through his veins; and if he is like me there will be a sense of relief when it is all over.

So the role of the priest is to help take us to that place where we can see God face to face; and so often that will be through actions rather than by words. Michael is doing precisely that today – in his actions he is taking us through the mirror, through the looking glass, to the wonderful world of the messianic feast..

Michael, as you will already know, has huge gifts and you are very lucky to have him as a curate, and it is a great honour for me to be able to share this occasion with you. But what he is doing today is immensely simple. The sheer simplicity, the sheer lack of pretension of bread and wine speak louder about God than any words at this service. In the very ordinary things of life, in bread and wine, we are drawn into the presence of God. The simple actions of the eucharist become for us the mirror where we can see things in their proper perspective. God is in the simplicity – not in the grandeur of kings, not even in the splendour of the liturgy, but in the bread and the wine

And that brings me back to where I started; like the image of the boy bishop, the eucharist turns everything on its head; the ways of the world, all our presuppositions, are shattered by the one who lets us glimpse him face to face. Every eucharist is really a feast of fools; it is the sign of that place where God can begin to recreate us in his image. So today I pray that with God's strength Michael will take us through the mirror into that place where we too discover our new identity. We are fools for Christ – like Peter and that strange band of fishermen and sinners who first saw Jesus for who he really was. And if we too are able to follow God's summons, when we look in a mirror we will see not just ourselves, but also something of the face of God. Amen.