

As the saying goes: ‘If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans’. There’s a Twitter acronym that must fit God’s reaction to most of what I’ve done with my life so far: ROFL – Rolls On Floor Laughing. When I was seven, I wanted to be famous, which was laudably unspecific (and there were no such things as celebrities in those days). God must have ROFLed robustly – it wasn’t part of his plot. At fifteen, and for about the next twenty-five years, I wanted to be an MP. God ROFLed again. I’d clearly misread the script on that one, although for the last twenty years I’ve been closely involved in helping other people to become MPs, with a rather splendid success just a month ago. By the time I went to university I was going to be an exploration geologist. The ROFL came a bit later this time – I got the degree but there were no jobs for women in the field. This most unmathematical, non-technical person ended up with a career in project management, organising IT geeks on big computer projects. It probably helped that I’d married an arch-geek and knew something about what made them tick. When I eventually stand before St Peter and he asks what I’ve done with my life, I can at least say that I’ve given God some tremendous belly-laughs.

The problem, of course, was that I told God my plans; that is, if I bothered to tell him anything. Some things worked out better, and they were the ones where I’d actually spent some time with him and listened a bit before striding off into the unknown. The forty years of marriage were pretty good – and I still look down from here and half expect to see that shock of grey hair halfway back down the church. Our daughter, who was as recalcitrant and infuriating as any teenager, has become extremely well-known and respected in her chosen profession, a very unusual one for a woman, and I’m tremendously proud of her. But the adventure that has proved most fulfilling and joyful is the one that was so unlikely that not only did it never occur to me, but God had to work extremely hard to convince me that it was his plan. Just to make it a bit more difficult, he wanted unconventional execution. No sooner had I grasped that God was insisting that I had to be ordained, than he followed up with another instruction: ‘Don’t give up the day job!’ We had a hard time convincing the various authorities that this was not only desirable but feasible, but we succeeded. On a Sunday evening in July, twenty-five plus one years ago, in a tropical downpour only slightly less intense than the one last Monday, I was ordained priest. I still cherish the comment made by a work colleague the following morning when he sneezed and I instinctively replied: Bless you!’ – ‘That’s official, isn’t it?’

And things have come full circle. I spent many years recruiting, training and mentoring people at work. A couple of years ago, after a quarter of a century of ministry which was highly eccentric (in the original ‘off centre’ sense of the word) and after the church had officially put me out to grass, the bishop asked me to help others explore their calling to priesthood. Methinks that God must be quietly chuckling with satisfaction.

Given that I have never really left geology behind, it seems appropriate that there are a number of stones in today’s readings. After Jacob had had his ladder dream he set up a stone as a pillar – an altar. Margaret the geologist immediately wonders what sort of stone it was. It marked a place where God had been experienced; not the only place but perhaps, in modern terms, a ‘thin place’, somewhere where God felt particularly close. Peter’s stones – and Peter himself is, of course, a rock, a foundation stone – his stones are ‘living stones’, people who will, as they come together, be built into a living temple, a spiritual house, a place for God. Today we celebrate St Peter’s Church, a combination of London brick and interestingly-bedded yellow sandstone in which, if you look carefully, the occasional fossil can be seen. We also honour the living stones who, for more than 125 years, have made ‘St Peter’s’ a cornerstone of the local community. It’s a place where people come together to worship,

pray, rejoice and commiserate, where individuals can find peace, hope, guidance and consolation, and where a succession of clergy and members of the congregation have offered a welcome and companionship to everyone who asks. No-one who comes here in faith will be snatched out of God's hand.

This is a spiritual house built of God's own people. The reading from 1 Peter ends with those marvellous words: 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.' And it is wonderful that today we are welcoming two more living stones, Ewa and John, who have chosen to become full members of our holy nation here in north Ealing. When they were baptised their parents and godparents promised to bring them up as Christians. The job isn't finished yet, but today is a very important milestone (there's another stone!) on their journey. To borrow words that they would have heard but not remembered from their baptism: 'The church receives these children with joy.' It certainly does. This is a truly joyful day. We rejoice with Ewa, John and their families as they are cemented more firmly into our life here, and rejoice with me in celebrating what happens when you do, eventually, listen to God's plans.