

A personal journey: Rev'd Dr John Beiers

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50th Anniversary of Priestly Ordination

My journey to ordination on 11 th June, 1970

I am grateful to Fr. Peter for the opportunity to celebrate a thanksgiving Eucharist here this morning, in gratitude to God for my 50 years as a priest in the Church of God. On St. Barnabas' Day, 1970, I was ordained priest in St. John's Cathedral, Brisbane, by the Archbishop, Philip Strong. I want to tell you something of God's graciousness in revealing His purpose to me, and some of the journey towards ordination. People have often asked me how I recognised God's call, so I will recount it today, not for any reason of self glorification, but in recognition of God's greatness, kindness, patience and love.

As a child, I lived in a very small village near Maryborough in Queensland, called Mungar Junction. My father asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, and, of course, I said "Engine Driver", because a favourite pastime of us kids was to stand in the white steam that the engine blew out when the train was standing at the Mungar station. He asked what the second option was. "School teacher", I replied, because dad was a teacher, and I admired him. "Not on your life," he said, "the Education Department has had me here for 15 years, with no transfer." I mulled over this.

Later, when I was 13 years old, I was given a copy of "Les Miserables" written by Victor Hugo in 1862. I was entranced by the story, especially The Bishop's Candlesticks, well known now, but not in 1950. In this early part of the novel, a starving ex-convict called Jean Valjean is given a meal and a

bed overnight at a country bishop's palace. He rises before dawn, takes all of the silver cutlery in his bag, and runs away. When he is caught and brought before the old bishop by the police, the bishop takes two beautiful silver candlesticks from the shelf over the fireplace, gives them to Valjean, and says, "You forgot these, which I also gave to you." When the police leave, he says to the thief, "Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to God. I have bought your soul of you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and give it to God." With these words, the bishop saved Valjean from being sentenced to the rest of his life in the galleys, where he had already spent 19 years for initially stealing a loaf of bread to feed his sister's starving children. With these words also, my heart was caught by the godly goodness of the bishop, and I wanted to be a priest like him. I told dad, who said, "No way, you will have a life of poverty, like Father Glazier", our visiting priest. And that was that.

But somehow, my Father God had caught me, and I did not even know at the time. High school and University days passed in a haze of sport and study, and I gained a Bachelor degree in Mining Engineering. Then, in 1960 I settled down to post-graduate research at the University of Queensland, in, of all things, the reduction of noise in pneumatic percussive machines such as rock drills and pavement breakers. In the ensuing four years, my parents died, and I found myself living alone in the family home, in a big high set Queenslander house in Brisbane. I had nearly completed the experimental work for the degree, but I ran out of money. Meals were frugal and highly planned, down to the last baked bean.

And it was then that God started to take care of me in a noticeable way. Firstly, my aunt rang me, and enquired whether I needed a cash loan, which I quickly accepted. Secondly, a fellow student's mother offered me an evening meal each day. Thirdly, I should have been grief stricken over the death of

my parents, but I experienced a quiet peace until the thesis was written, and then the sorrow really hit me, at a time when I could manage it.

However, during this period, I was never content with the amount of work I was achieving each day, but I had become aware of God's love providing all my daily needs, so I decided to start off each day with Matins, or Morning Prayer from the Prayer Book, as a sort of thank-you, before I began work. At that time, my work consisted of analysing all the experimental results that I had accumulated over the years. This required a clear head and no distractions. I found that this was now happening, so I started to pray Evensong, or Evening Prayer as a thank-you before going to bed, A wonderful thing happened. Whereas before giving this time to God, I had never been able to accomplish the amount of work I would set myself each day, now I was achieving even more. Wow! So I began to pause at midday, and to say the Midday Office as I ate my little can of tuna and a slice of bread.

You need to understand that this was all so unexpected that it could only be the hand of God. I was experiencing at first hand, in my own life, the great love of God that other Christians talked about, but until then it had been only theory for me. I started to see that God was clearing the path for me, for something that He was planning. I wondered what tangible thing I could do to say thank-you, and the idea of being a priest once again popped into my head. I went to the selection Committee of St. Francis' College in Brisbane and had a talk with them. I was accepted, but I set the entrance date at two years in the future. You see, I had my degree in Mining Engineering, but two years practical experience underground were required, and a Pass Degree in Mining Law was necessary before I could qualify as a mine manager. I felt that I needed to complete so much previous study by going the full course. Then I went to Broken Hill to New Broken Hill Consolidated, where I was

accepted. The Mine Manager was a practising Anglican. I confided in him my plans to go to Theological College, and he understood completely.

Like the convict, Jean Valjean, God had got me. For all the 50 years since then, I thank God that I have had His unconditional love, whether I was within His will, or disobedient. He has never failed me, and the recollection of all His past love to me is what sustains me, comforts me, and leads me forward.