

The Life and Work of a Priest, John Pritchard (SPCK, 2007)

For leaders who are priests, this is a stunning book by John Pritchard, Bishop of Oxford. His *Intercessions Handbook* is one of my most-used and always inspiring books, and *How to Pray* I find a constant resource for refreshing my prayer life. So I came to this book with high expectations, and was not disappointed.

Many books have been written about being a priest, but there are few around today which I would commend both to those who are thinking about ordination and to experienced clergy. The book has a practical feel about it: 'this is what life as a priest is like', but it is also imaginative and provocative, and engages helpfully with the challenges of a mixed-economy church, and the need for pioneering and collaborative leadership.

The first chapter, 'What kind of love is this?' looks at being a priest as a kind of loving. After giving the criteria for selection and exploring why God might want priests, he concludes by picturing God as the supreme Artist who invites us to paint:

'Because this is a long-term project he also appoints a few people to act as convenors of the painting workshop, not because they're any better at painting than anyone else but simply because he calls them. And so we get on with the great commission, not 'painting by numbers' but rather painting 'after the style of Christ' – the Artist's equally gifted Son. In every church in the world, in every locality and in each life, the painting goes on...'

After this, the book is structured around three themes: the glory of God, the pain of the world, and the renewal of the Church. Under these headings Pritchard explores a number of images which sum up the priest's tasks, including those of spiritual explorer, artful storyteller, wounded companion, friendly irritant, and flower arranger (managing the church's life). The book is wonderfully illustrated with cartoons by Ron.

Pritchard writes with a light touch, combining his own experience and reading, and the insights of others, with unobtrusive theological depth. Right at the heart, and emphasised in the introduction, is prayer and the call to holiness ('God is our magnificent obsession'; 'prayer is a matter of life or death'), and half a dozen brief prayers by the author call the reader to pause and pray.

It is refreshing to read a book about priesthood which is not addressed solely to men; this book feels inclusive - and that includes the cartoons! I was particularly struck by the emphasis in the 'leadership' chapter on corporate ministry, with the leader as a *team* leader: 'the priest always leads in collaboration with others'.

The book concludes with reference to the ordination service and the commitment which is made. 'Many years on, by far the majority of clergy would still say that the best decision they could ever have made was to accept God's call to the life and work of a priest.' I sense that this book will encourage some priests to re-connect with the ministry to which they were first called, and will inspire others to take that step into ordained ministry.