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The Priest's Speech

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The King's Speech opens up the life of a stutterer better than I ever could have thought possible. It is a great movie. I am glad it was made, glad it received the "Best Picture" Academy Award, and especially glad for Colin Firth's careful study in preparation for his role as the king who stuttered. It was painful to watch, painful to remember for several days, but only because the film captured the inner and the audible life of one who stutters.

It's a different life, the life of a stutterer. I should know, because I, like George VI, also stutter. Sitting in a circle, for example, and waiting to introduce yourself to a group of strangers may not be on your avoid-at-all-costs list, but it is on mine. I cringe, get nervous, count the people as my turn comes, and then say my name in such a way that often draws stares if not chuckles.

My first memory is trying to say my name to a substitute teacher in nursery school. Many years later came another vivid memory. I had just graduated from the University of Virginia and had taken the Navy's Officer Candidate School exam. I went back to the recruiting station a week later to get my score. The examining officer asked me for my name. After hearing me give it, he never even gave me my score.

Bertie, as he was called in the movie, had no choice in his role as Duke of York and, later, King of England. He had to speak. Not so for me. As a college student looking to the future, I had choices of careers. I recall reading a booklet on the ordained ministry that featured helpful examples of who should and, more importantly, who shouldn't go into the ministry. For example, someone with a stutter, of course, shouldn't go into the ministry. Of course not! Well, I did.

At my ordination to the priesthood my bishop casually remarked to me that I should take care of my speech impediment. As if, no problem, go out and get myself the key that will unlock fluency. I did have speech therapy. Much of it, over twenty years. It helped, always. Some helped with my motor skills and speech muscles, and some helped in the psychological realm. It all helped — but the cause of stuttering and its cure remain unknown. Bertie's therapist, Lionel Logue, had some shrewd and effective exercises that reduced the frequency of his stuttering, but the stutter was with him till the end.

I once had a very good therapist who was Jewish. We discussed worship frequently because liturgical texts present problems for a stutterer, since there is no deviating from the printed text. She wanted to know what wording regularly gave me trouble. Well, that was easy: "mystery of faith" as in, "Therefore we proclaim the mystery of faith: Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again." As we went over that powerful passage week after week — and with the memory returning whenever I celebrate — her presence always gave added authenticity and

dimension to that statement. We never tried reading liturgy to the tune of “The Camptown Races,” but don’t laugh — it helped Bertie.

It takes one to know one. Often I would remark to my wife about a person’s speech impediment, only to discover that she has noticed no such speech impediment. It takes an ear, an ear that notices when someone inserts a pause at the most improbable place but inserts one nevertheless to avoid a stammer; or an ear that picks up a digression from a clearly intended word to a substituted one that can be spoken without stuttering.

Those two self-conscious speech patterns have affected my life. After all, there is nothing that undoes emphasis more than an awkwardly timed pause or not using the very right word at the strategic time. So all my friends think of me as modest, caring, listening, pastoral, calm, sweet, and all the qualities of grace. Not at all. The explanation is far simpler — I just can never deliver my shriveling comments with the timing and the velocity that hit their target.

My friends also say how brave I must be to be in public and in the pulpit with this very obvious speech impediment. Brave? Doubtful. Take Bertie, after he delivered his climactic speech to an unseen radio audience and delivered it well: he showed no elation, no air of victory. He was exhausted, glad to have done it in seclusion and mindful of the Ws he stuttered on.

When you stutter, whether as the King of England or a priest, you do what you have to do. And you wish — always you wish — that it could have been fluent. But by the grace of God and the goodness of the congregations, life went fairly well and fairly ordinarily.

For twenty-five years I was in parish ministry, mostly at St. Matthew’s in Richmond. Then for nearly fifteen years I was the Director of Anglican Frontier Missions, an organization that I founded. In each role, parish priest or advocate to the church for the least evangelized, I spoke. Often. People would frequently say that it always surprised them to hear me stutter, because most of the time I would not. Inside my head, however, I was always dealing with it, often spotting a stammer coming and figuring out how to work around it. Stuttering was not always evident but was always lurking.

I guess the congregation just got used to it. I never asked their reactions because a) I didn’t want to bring up my impediment in public, or b) if I never talked about it, I could pretend it wasn’t there. I don’t know, what do you think — did I fool them?

Clergy often get criticized for coming across as Messianic. I tend to model myself more modestly after Moses, another stutterer (see Exodus 4:10). I also claim close company with Paul, for I’m fairly certain stuttering was the thorn in his flesh. But ultimately I’ll pass on those models. Suffice it for me to be in the closest company of Bertie, King of England.



Tad de Bordenave lives on the Northern Neck of Virginia where he raises oysters and participates in the life of St. Stephen’s Anglican Church. He is also researching for a book on St. Paul and his emphasis on the least evangelized peoples. Father de Bordenave is a priest of the Diocese of Makurdi, Nigeria.