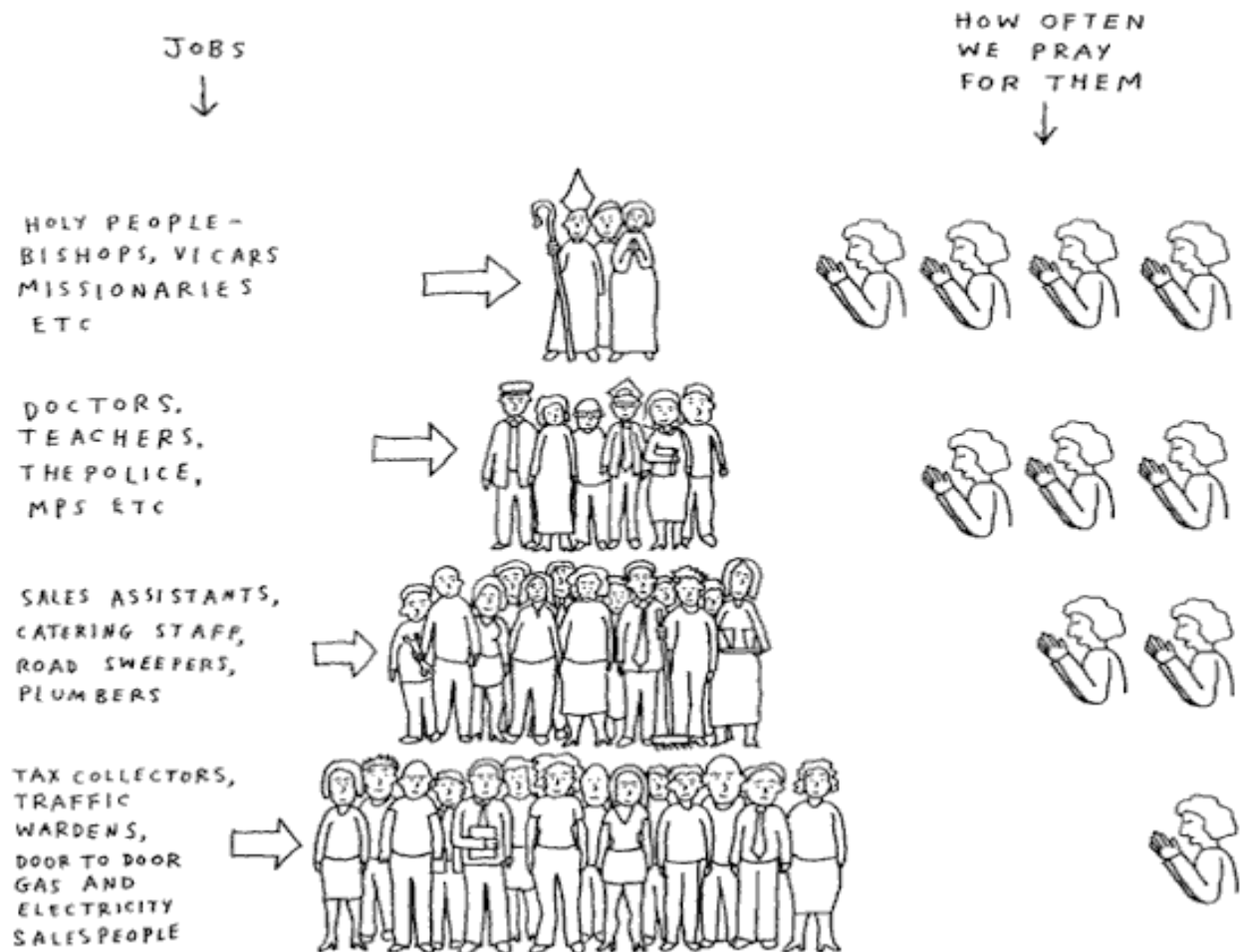


A HIERARCHY OF VOCATIONS



Cartoon © Dave Walker/www.cartoonchurch.com

For God's sake, stop praying for the clergy...

Various wags have noted before that given the frequency with which they are prayed for in church, the clergy should be in better shape than they are. The same might be said of the Royal Family and Parliament. What is it with the laity that when leading our common prayer they have to mention the clergy so often?

Dave Walker, a highly gifted cartoonist, makes the point beautifully in one of his cartoons: the amount of public prayer for specific groups appears to vary in inverse

proportion to their number and usefulness. So bishops and priests seem to be mentioned every time, but rarely those groups that keep the daily processes of our grubby and glorious human societies ticking over: IT engineers, public transport workers, retail people, electricians, printers, pastry cooks, conveyancing solicitors and all those admin people.

Beyond the clergy, some other groups seem to get disproportionate intercessory

attention: doctors are popular (but less so hospital porters, path lab staff, hospital managers). Teachers also tend to get frequent intercessory hits, but I don't recall the last time I heard mention of school caretakers or the nit nurse.

Prayer is a serious thing and we ought not trivialise it. Best to ditch the delicate delivery - this is no intimidating Aunt we speaking with. Best to ditch the all-encompassing geopolitical check list (remember, its prayer, not a talking gazetteer). When leading public prayer we should speak to God as we might to a trusted friend: directly, unselfconsciously and simply. "What's on your mind Hugh?" asks my chum. And I spill the beans.

The description of prayer I most value comes from William Stringfellow. Not quite the kind of 'advice' a would-be intercessor might expect, but amongst the best. "And when I mention that I needed to pray, I am referring to prayer in what I understand to be its most essential, simple and rudimentary reality, as a relationship in which the authentic (or, one could say, original) identity of a person is affirmed by the Word of God by the Word of God. Prayer, as I mean it, has its integrity in recall of the event of one's own creation in the Word of God. Prayer, in this significance, is distinguished from the vulgar or profane connotations that have, unhappily, accrued to the term. prayer, for instance, has nothing, as such, to do with utterance, language,

posture, ceremony or pharisaical style and tradition. Prayer is not 'talking' with God, to God, or about God. It is not asking God for anything whatsoever. It is not bargaining with God. It has no similarity to conjuring, fantasizing, sentimental indulgence, or superstitious practice. It is not motivational therapy... More definitely, prayer is not personal in the sense of a private transaction occurring in a void, disconnected with everyone and everything else, but it is so personal that it reveals (I have chosen this verb conscientiously) every connection with everyone and everything else in the whole of Creation throughout time. A person in the estate of prayer is identified in relation to Alpha and Omega to the inception of everything and to the fulfilment of everything (cf Romans 1:20, 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, Revelation 22:12). In prayer, the initiative belongs to the Word of God, acting to identify, or to reiterate the identity of, the one who prays. ...Prayer, in quintessence, therefore, is a political action - an audacious one, at that - bridging the gap between immediate realities and ultimate hope, between ethics and eschatology, between the world as it is and the Kingdom which is vouchsafed." (*A Simplicity of Faith: My Experience in Mourning* by William Stringfellow, 1982, p67,68).

Please, stop praying for the clergy so often. Its time we went to the back of the queue.

Hugh Valentine hugh@st-james-piccadilly.org
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