

## Ministering with humility

***A sermon preached at St Peter's Wolvercote on Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> July 2007 by the Rev'd Viv Bridges***

*The readings for this Sunday (Trinity 5) were 2 Kings 5.1-14, Galatians 6.7-16, Luke 10.1-11,16-20; and it was also Rachel Weir's first Sunday as a new Curate at St Peter's.*

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It is a great pleasure to be preaching on Rachel's first Sunday with us because, of course, my own 'first Sunday' wasn't very long ago, so I remember something of how it felt for me. There was excitement and joy that something that had been in my heart for a long time had happened at last; and there was much nervousness – was I going to be able to do the things I promised at my ordination? I still have those feelings. Nearly two years after my ordination as deacon, I am still doing things for the first time, so there is still that mixture of excitement and nervousness. I have to confess that I have occasionally questioned my own sanity - at starting something at 'my time of life' that pretty well guarantees regular sessions of nervousness and stress for many years to come (I hope). But, of course, any sense of 'insanity', any disappointments, any embarrassment at mistakes, are overcome by the many joys of the ministry and by the growing realisation that God always supports and guides me when I allow him to.

It was tempting to use the fact that it's Sea Sunday as the basis for reflection on starting out on a new ministry – with the idea of starting out on what could be a rather perilous journey. But today's readings have much to say about 'vocations and ministry' and some things seemed to stand out particularly.

The wonderful story of Naaman teaches us a very clear lesson about humility. Naaman thought himself far too important to take the advice of someone who wouldn't even come out to talk to him, far too great to go for a swim in an ISRAELITE river! It was only when his servants persuaded him to humble himself that Naaman was cured. And Paul taught us the same thing in his letters - over and over again he said that HE couldn't boast about anything - that all his achievements were Christ's achievements and that ALL his strength was from Christ. Paul counted himself as nothing.

Jesus had some interesting things to say to the seventy that he chose to send before him. 'See,' he said 'I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves!' I know that this **is** how some incumbents and curates feel, but I'm glad to say that I've never felt 'set upon by wolves', even though people in this parish aren't afraid to say what they feel. Neither have I ever felt it necessary to 'wipe the dust off my feet'. Rather, I have been welcomed into people's homes, and spent much time 'eating and drinking what was set before me'. One of those joys I mentioned comes from the great privilege of being allowed to share in the joys and the sadnesses of people's lives, and I have often felt humbled by examples of great courage in the face of awful difficulties, and by the depth of faith that so many of you have.

So I haven't shared the seventy's negative experiences, but unfortunately I haven't shared in their successes either - I haven't brought about any dramatic cures, and I haven't noticed any demons submitting to me. I haven't actually trodden on any snakes or scorpions to know whether or not they would hurt me, but stinging nettles are as painful as ever so I don't seem to have any particular 'power over the enemy'. But this, of course, reminds me that being ordained doesn't, of itself, confer 'special miraculous powers'. The ability to move mountains and cast out demons requires such a deep faith that few of us ever experience it.

It also reminds us that that ordination doesn't make anyone 'greater' than anyone else. Rather - it carries a special responsibility of humility which includes remembering that being a bishop, priest or deacon is only one of the many ways in which God calls his people to serve him. St Paul explains so often that **each** of us has a vital part to play in carrying out God's ministry – and Naaman wouldn't have been cured without his servants and that Israelite slave-girl.

So it doesn't matter **what** part each of us has, as long as we try to play that part to the best of our ability, and try to support and encourage each other. And St Paul also keeps on reminding us that we can only do this with God's guidance and strength.

I have said before that I have often been aware that God was guiding and strengthening me, **when I allowed him to**. I've had to somehow try to let go of my need to 'be in control'. I've had to take time to try to be close to God and to remember that, even though I do have my part to play, the Holy Spirit will manage without me for

the few hours, or few days – or even the weeks – it may take to keep me TRULY open to what God wants to say, rather than to what I might WANT him to say.

Of course, everyone agrees that it is vital in any Christian ministry to take care of our relationship with God, but many find it difficult, if not impossible, to make time for prayer, especially ministers in very busy Parishes. But this isn't always the fault of the parishioners. I know a number of priests who agree that they are very bad at taking their day off, or at putting time into their diaries for quiet days or retreats. They find it difficult to ignore those voices (that come from within and without) that say that it's a **waste** of time to take time to pray – you should always be 'doing' parish work. I consider myself blessed in being in this parish because you all seem to understand that God can only work through us if we keep the lines of communication open. You have supported my need to get away to be alone, and I know you will support Rachel's need – and her need for time to be with her family, with Andrew, and with Jemima, Ben and Naomi.

Being ordained, then, doesn't make anyone greater, or particularly special, because every individual vocation and ministry is an important part of God's ministry and relies totally on the guidance and strength of the Holy Spirit. But **today** Rachel's ordination DOES feel very special. We celebrate her calling and ministry; we promise our support for her and for her family as they start this new phase of their life. We hope that they will be blessed with much joy and much awareness of God's love. And we pray that God will fill Rachel with his Spirit as she seeks to be a vehicle for his presence and love here among us. Amen.