

Celebrating 25 years of women's ordination

A sermon preached by Revd Charles Draper on Trinity 16, Sunday 6 October 2019 in St Peter's Church
Refs: Joel 2 v 28-29; Galatians 3 v 23-29; Luke 17.5-10

I am very grateful to Jo Coney for inviting me to preach today. I had expected to rota all women priests but Jo was very clear she didn't want men to be excluded! I do still feel a little hesitant. It's difficult for me as a man to fully appreciate all that this anniversary means and all the feelings around it but I do feel it's a privilege to preach on this occasion. Thank you, Jo.

This summer, during our holiday in north Yorkshire, we went up for the day to Durham. It was a trip down memory lane for me. I took my first degree in Engineering at Durham. While there, I popped in on St Nicholas' church which I attended while a student. Our vicar was George Carey. Whatever you may think of him as an archbishop, he was certainly an excellent vicar. But even in those days he was a passionate advocate for the ordination of women. I remember him reporting back on a Synod meeting, which had just decided that the time was not yet right to proceed with Women's Ordination. Someone had suggested that this was a wise decision. George Carey would have none of it. He made it quite clear that he thought it was a dreadful decision and he totally disagreed with it! This would have been about 1979, 40 years ago.

When he became archbishop, he was no less forthright. In fact it fell to the archbishop of York, John Habgood, to mollify the opponents of the ordination of women, and to reassure them that the Church still respected their views. But I do remember Jane and I listening to the crucial General Synod debate, which was broadcast live on the radio. I particularly remember George Carey asking everyone at the end of the debate, to share the Peace before they voted. That was a special moment. I still remember when the votes were read out, the moment we realised that all three houses, bishops, clergy and laity, had reached the required two thirds majority – and now at last, we could go ahead. It was a very special moment.

A second memory from this year's summer holiday was the evening we watched the film "Suffragette". Opinions vary as to the merits of the film but it did bring home to me what a hard fought struggle it was, what those suffragettes went through, and what impossible odds they seemed to be up against. It also brought home a sense of tragedy – of how many women's gifts and talents have been ignored, overlooked or never discovered, for so much of history. The curse of the Garden of Eden has hung heavy on humanity. Its shadow is very long. In Genesis 3, God says that a consequence of humankind turning away from God is that men will rule over women. It takes a moment to realise the enormity of what the writer of Genesis is saying. He is saying that the normal state of things in the world he knew, where men ruled over women, was a result of human beings going wrong, a consequence of human beings turning away from God.

I believe that the change that has happened and is still happening, bringing equality between men and women and releasing women's gifts for the good of all humanity, is the work of the Holy Spirit. It's all in Joel, our first reading today. Joel, this little-known prophet, writing about 500 years before the time of Jesus, is the one who foretold most clearly the coming of the Holy Spirit, fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, and quoted by Peter the apostle in his sermon that day.

"Then afterwards I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit."

"Your sons and your daughters". Joel spells out that men and women, slaves and free people will all equally be recipients of the Holy Spirit, will all equally be empowered by the Spirit, and will therefore all be channels

of the Spirit, the Spirit enabling them to use their gifts to bring blessings to others. It's all there in Joel, 2500 years ago!

It's no co-incidence that St Luke, who tells us a great deal about the coming of the Holy Spirit, gives us this story in our gospel reading of Anna the prophet proclaiming in the Temple about the meaning of the coming of Jesus. As the Holy Spirit springs into action around the birth of Jesus, the women are just as much part of the story and part of the action as the men.

Of course, the early church struggled with this in the context of a very rigid culture. Even Jesus went along with the culture of the day in having twelve male apostles. But alongside this he included many women amongst his closest followers in a way that would have seemed quite radical. If you look carefully at the New Testament, it's full of examples of women actively involved in ministry and leadership in the early church. I'm sure God is making certain we get the point when he arranges that it's women who are first witnesses of the resurrection.

But let's be clear. This is not about the liberation of women for the sake of women. The most sexist person in the world can be nice to women. This is about releasing women's gifts for the benefit of all. Men as much as women benefit from the release of women's gifts made possible by the ordination of women. When and where women are not ordained, men are impoverished as much as women are.

Some of you will be asking why this took so long. Why was it not until 1994 that the first women were ordained to the priesthood in the Church of England? Looking back now, it feels extraordinary and terrible that when I was ordained priest, the women who trained with me could only be ordained deacon. Worse still, why was it not until 2014 that women could be ordained bishops? And why did we lag so far behind society around us? As someone once put it, rewriting the hymn "Onward Christian soldiers":

"Like a mighty tortoise moves the church of God, Brothers we are treading where we've always trod."

I am going to say a word in support of our slow-moving, ponderous Church of England. What we try to do in the church is work by consensus, moving together, as far as possible taking everyone with us. That's why the bar was set so impossibly high. Before we could proceed with the ordination of women as priests or as bishops, we had to have a two thirds majority in Synod, in all three houses, bishops, clergy and laypeople. And that means consensus. In our country right now we're seeing what happens when you try to make great changes based on a simple majority, completely ignoring the views of the very large, differently thinking minority. We're seeing the result of that – years of strife, conflict and division. That's whatever you think of the issue itself. I don't know the answer, but I do think there is wisdom in the way the church seeks to work together, by consensus, , trying as far as possible to keep everybody on board.

That is surely why we have remained. by and large, united. Apart from a very small minority, the church has wholeheartedly welcomed and rejoiced in the ministry of women as priests. What I think we are celebrating today is not a vote, but a change of culture. Not a vote in which there are winners and losers but a change of culture, a change of hearts and minds, in which we are all winners.

There is a cost in all of this. It has meant that the process has been agonisingly slow. And I want today to salute the women of the Church of England, and especially the women deacons of 25 years ago, who were the most patient people in the world. To me they are the true heroes, who were prepared to wait for that painfully slow process, for the rest of us to come on board, for hearts and minds to change, for that change of culture we celebrate today, for the patient work of the Holy Spirit, bringing liberation to the church, and bringing that great release of gifts that has become such a blessing to the whole church, and a blessing to our world and our society around us.