

Celebrating the 20th anniversary of a woman's first presiding at the Eucharist in St Peter's

A sermon preached by Rev Dr Amanda Bloor, Director of Ordinands for Berkshire and Dorchester at St Peter's Wolvercote, 28 September 2014

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32, (Philippians 2:1-13), Matthew 21:23-32

I don't know about you, but I love celebrations. Birthdays bring out the ten-year-old in me. And there are things that have to be done – I feel that my birthday isn't a proper birthday unless there's a cake with candles (even nicer if it's been home-made) and at some point during the day various members of my family have sung 'happy birthday' either in person or down the telephone. I'm delighted by familiar traditions, and love the fact that there are people around to make a bit of a fuss and to celebrate with me. I'm always completely bewildered by people who lament birthdays because they're getting older, or try to ignore them, or simply aren't interested. Anniversaries matter. Marking milestones is important.

Of course, we're not celebrating a birthday today (unless there's someone in the congregation – if so, raise your hand and we'll sing to you later!) – except in a sense, we are. We're marking the birth of a new ministry, a significant anniversary, as it's been twenty years since a woman first presided at the Eucharist in this church. And she's here, presiding at today's Eucharist, and probably wondering where the last twenty years went – to say nothing of the various significant ministries before she was ordained. She's still doing what God has called her to, still faithful, still active in service and willing to trust. She formally retired ten years ago, but since then there she's continued to work in ministries with the Franciscan Order and within the Diocesan vocations teams, to say nothing of her role here in the parish.

I know Jo well enough to be sure that she'll be squirming by now, and gently grumbling that today is about God and the church, not about her. And that's true to a point. And I'm here to preach a sermon, not to give an after-dinner speech about the guest of honour. But I say again, anniversaries matter. The fact that Jo was able to preside at the Eucharist in this church twenty years ago was not just an accident of geography, of being in the right place at the right time, but it required whole rafts of people to step out in faith and take a risk. Jo herself, to listen to God's calling to ordained ministry and act on it; the Church of England, to make the decision that women could be ordained as priests despite some heartfelt objections; and the congregation, PCC and leadership teams here, to invite her to stand behind the altar and say the words of consecration, to offer up bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ. It took courage. It was risky.

As the Diocesan Advisor in Women's Ministry for the last six years or so, it's been my job to be a link between ordained women, the wider Church, and the Diocese. Earlier this year I had the privilege of organising a service to mark the twentieth anniversary of the ordination of women to the priesthood, noting especially the contribution of all the people who had made that possible – the women who were ordained, many of whom had served very faithfully in lay ministries whilst longing to be allowed to fulfil their calling; the lay women and men who had campaigned for change in the Church, believing it to be God's desire; and the male priests who had given their support to the Measure. And also being aware of the fact that for some people, for genuinely held beliefs or understandings, it had been a painful moment. That's why when the vote was passed by Synod in 1994, supporters of ordained

women were told not to cheer or celebrate, but to receive the result in silence. And why at the national service of celebration at St Paul's Cathedral, earlier this year, Archbishop Justin moved so many of us when he gave permission – at last - to rejoice in the blessing that ordained women have been for the Church.

And they *have* been a blessing – in what they've done, but perhaps more importantly, in what they represent: that men *and* women are made in God's image, loved and valued by God, and called to various forms of ministry. By modelling this in a particular way, priests of both sexes can give us an insight into God's presence in the world.

I'd like to read a short passage by Kathleen Norris about her first exposure to a Roman Catholic Mass at a friend's wedding, and how she made sense of what was happening:

I had very little idea of what was going on around the altar or what the ritual actions and words were supposed to signify. I was mildly curious but clueless, and my husband-to-be and his friends were too hung-over to help. They were mostly "lapsed" Catholics...they seemed vastly bored by the proceedings and had not gone forward to receive communion. But...at one point, I gasped. "Look," I said, tugging on Dave's sleeve. "Look at that! The priest is cleaning up! He's doing the dishes!" My husband shrugged; others in the pew looked at me and then at him, as if to say – Dave, your girlfriend has gone soft in the head.

But I found it remarkable – and still find it remarkable – that in that big, fancy church, after all of the dress-up and the formalities of the wedding mass, homage was being paid to the lowly truth that we human beings must wash the dishes after we eat and drink. The chalice, which had held the very blood of Christ, was no exception. And I found it enormously comforting to see the priest as a kind of daft housewife, overdressed for the kitchen, in bulky robes, puttering about the altar, washing up after having served so great a meal to so many people. It welcomed me, a stranger...¹

Similar things have been said about women priests in the Church of England. I don't mean that reductively or in an essentialist way, suggesting that washing up is women's work, but that they make us look again, and looking afresh, as if for the first time, being surprised into new ways of seeing the familiar, can open up new understandings of God.

It's not been plain sailing of course. The fact that it's taken twenty years to move from that first step to agree that it's theologically incoherent, if women can be priests, for them not also to be able to become bishops. That ordained women and supportive bishops can be the target of abuse or criticism. And of course, the biggest thing of all, the knowledge that some people felt forced to leave the Church of England because of this change, and that some congregations, and some priests, cannot accept the legitimacy of women's orders, or of the bishops who ordain them, and look for alternative oversight and leadership. This hurts. We are a *family* of believers, the Body of Christ in the world, and no-one wants to cause division or be a source of pain. But God's calling really can't be ignored.

¹ Kathleen Norris, *The Quotidian Mysteries*, 1998 pp.2-3

It's risky.

But this is nothing new. We've heard it this morning in the readings, from Ezekiel setting a challenge that God says this:

I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways and how risky that makes change seem! Yet it's change that's demanded of them, to turn away from injustice and sin, and to get a 'new heart and a new spirit.' It's in turning, that they live.

And similarly, in the Gospel, Jesus himself is under scrutiny. We're two days on from Palm Sunday: Jesus and his disciples have entered Jerusalem in a procession that deliberately recalled the prophecies of how the Messiah would arrive, he's turned over the tables of the money changers in the Temple, he's healed the blind and the lame within the Temple precincts, and after a night at Bethany, just outside the city, he's returned and has begun to teach. It's no wonder that the chief priests and the city elders are edgy, and demand by whose authority he's doing these things.

Yet, typically, Jesus doesn't give them a straight answer. He reminds them, obliquely, of how John the Baptist was treated, although he's now regarded by the people as a respected prophet. (It reminds us too of the fact that being a prophet – standing out from the crowd because of your faith – can be enormously costly. It cost John his life.) And then after telling a parable about two sons, one who said the right things but didn't carry them through, and one who despite being grumpy and initially unhelpful got down to doing what had been asked of him, he makes the astounding claim that the dregs of society – the tax-collectors and prostitutes – will reach the kingdom of God before the priests and the elders. It's getting on and *doing* God's will that matters, not talking about it. It may be risky, but there is no alternative.

Archbishop Justin has described the Church of England as the only club that exists for the benefit of its non-members. That means that we have to have something credible and important to say to those outside the Church as well as to the faithful sitting in the pews. It doesn't mean that we have to bend with the wind and blindly follow every whim of society, but it does mean that we have to listen to what the world is saying, and discern what our response should be. What is Godly? What does our faith say in particular situations, or when faced with intractable questions? And when can holding fast to old patterns, old certainties, actually damage our mission in the world? It was a question that became relevant when discussing the ordination of women, and again when making decisions about women and the Episcopate. It doesn't mean that we'll always get it right – it's that risk again – but if we stand still, we stagnate.

John Saxbee, the former Bishop of Lincoln, and a supporter of women's ordination, wrote this about his feelings after the decision was made:

It wasn't just that a long-cherished objective had been achieved, or that a justice denied by being so long delayed had now been honoured. It had

something to do with being part of a Church which had claimed its wholeness as the people of God.²

He acknowledges the 'practicalities of co-existence with those whose hearts were broken by the very thing which made us feel whole,' but insists that 'it has all been worth it.' I hope that Jo would say the same. Yet the venture involved risk and much soul-searching. As will future questions posed to the Church and the faithful by society. I watched, on Friday, some television reporting of the debate in Parliament about taking military action against the insurgents in Iraq, and saw not just the Archbishop of Canterbury giving a speech, but also the bench of bishops listening intently, wrestling with the issues and trying to discern what was the right thing to do. There will be new and complex issues for us to face as a Church. Same-sex relationships will probably be the next big debate, but there will be others. And that's good. It means that we are asking the big questions: what is it to be human? What is it to believe that we're made in God's image? What does God ask of us in this situation? What is it that our faith demands of us?

I said to someone a few days ago that Christianity is a verb rather than a noun. It requires an active response.

Twenty years ago, a woman stood behind the altar in this church. It was her first Eucharist after being made a priest, and it was the first time that a woman had presided here. Thank you, Jo, for taking the risk of responding to God's calling, and thank you, St Peter's, for taking the risk of trusting in her vocation. And thank you for giving me the chance to celebrate it.

² Christina Rees, *Voices of this Calling*, 2002 p.193