

Sermon for Sunday Morning 14 July 2024 at Holy Trinity Geneva

7th Sunday after Trinity & Celebration of 25th Anniversary of Ordination as Priest

Texts: Jeremiah 31.31-34; Psalm 85.8-end; 2 Corinthians 5.17-6.2; Matthew 9.35-10.1

“The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers into his harvest”. (Matthew 9.31)

One of the saddest sights is to see fruit and vegetables go to waste because they are not harvested at all or are damaged before they can be picked. I remember witnessing this on a trip to the Black Forest two years ago and seeing hundreds and hundreds of apples lying on the ground and thinking what one might have done with them.

But imagine that instead of apples, it was human lives which were going to waste. This is what confronted Jesus as he travelled around the towns and villages of Galilee and Judea teaching and healing those who came to him. The gospel writers often tell us of Jesus’ emotional response to the situations and people he faced. In our gospel today, we’re told that Jesus had compassion on the crowds who came to him – seeing them as ‘harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd’. He is moved to act and he sends the twelve disciples, commissioning them and giving them power to heal and to cast out unclean spirits.

It’s no accident that this gospel text is often chosen for the ordination of deacons and priests and bishops. For it is about God’s calling and it is why, as we celebrate the 25th anniversary of my ordination as priest at this time, I have also chosen it for our service today. I give profound thanks to God today for the gift of ordination and to every one of you for your warmth and welcome as I minister here at Holy Trinity.

However, as John Pritchard, the former Bishop of Oxford points out in his book on the life and work of a priest, the priest is there ‘as God’s gift of love, to help the Church live up to its calling and to help the Church make the love of God known in the wider community’. All clergy, whatever their role or office are only there to serve and support the ministry of all God’s people. The priest has vital representative role as a sign, but God is calling every one of us to take part in this ministry of making the love of God known in the world.

So whilst I rejoice at the 25th anniversary of my priesting, this it is fundamentally not about me, but rather what it means for us as the whole people of God gathered here at Holy Trinity, to be faithful to our calling to make God’s love real, visible and experienced in the world. Today therefore, I want us to address some challenging questions. Why is God calling us to do this? What exactly is He asking us to do? How is He equipping us to do it? And finally, what resolution will each of make today to do this?

Why is God calling us to do this? We don't have to look very far to start to see some answers. Just as Jesus saw the crowds 'harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd', so we too see those who are bewildered and lost today. People who are seeking meaning in their lives; those who are hurt, alienated or ignored; those facing life's hardest battles with no source of hope; those are rich in the world's terms but wonder what on earth it is all about.

And as we look then to Christ, we see that this was the very reason He came into the world. For God's love constantly reaches out, overflowing from the love which exists at the heart of the Trinity. Jesus came into the world to help humanity find its way back to God; to understand, through seeing his own life, what it means to live as a true human being, as God intended. Through his sacrificial death on the cross, he conquered the power of evil and through his resurrection, opened to us the gateway to the new life of God's kingdom which wells up, wherever we allow ourselves to be touched by the life of the Holy Spirit.

What exactly is God asking us to do? A couple of weeks ago, here at Holy Trinity, we said farewell to the Liddle family. Aidan Liddle had served as UK Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva. Aidan played a key role in representing the values, expectations, plans and ideas of the UK government to the UN and at the same time, he was able to be a conduit, sharing and explaining thinking within the UN to the UK government. As such he had a key role in helping to bring about reconciliation in a number of contexts through building up understanding and trust.

Jesus, as St Paul shows us today, came into the world to reconcile us to God – to help us find the way back to God and to show us the values of God's kingdom. These are values based, not on serving our own interests and ambitions, nor trying to gain as much as we possibly can at the expense of others, but those of self-giving love, of forgiveness, of seeking mutual flourishing rooted in the love of God. Jesus, in a way, was Ambassador for God the Father. For he showed us in his own life on earth, his death on the Cross and his resurrection, what it means to live as a human being, by these values of God's kingdom, which bring ultimate life and fulfilment, not just to us, but to others and can bring healing and reconciliation.

So what is God calling us to do? To be ambassadors too, but in our cases, not for our governments but for Christ whose kingdom embraces the whole world. This is a role for every one of us through the commission which God gave us at our Baptism. Bishop John Pritchard reports a conversation which occurred between three clergy and a newcomer to one of their clergy chapter meeting. The newcomer asked each of them, in turn, where their churches were. The first replied, "Just down the road by the library"; the second said, "It's on the way to the station". However, the third replied, "Where is my church? Right now, they are spread out all over the town".

It's a wonderful image and one which is true for all Christian communities including us at Holy Trinity. Only in our case, we're not just present in Geneva, but through neighbouring cantons, over the border in France and through our very welcome online presence, in a number of other countries throughout the world as well. It's something worth really reflecting and praying today what it means. For mission is not

a 'bolt-on' to the church – to be done by those who have special qualifications or more than usual degrees of confidence. The Church *is* mission and every one of us has this role as an ambassador of Christ, not on Sunday morning in church but in the rest of our lives.

What we are called by God to do will depend on our specific contexts, whom we encounter and the situations we face in the context of our individual lives. But as a common thread, our calling is help people to experience the love of God; to find meaning and purpose in their lives through this; and to see how life can be very different if we live by the values of God's kingdom.

It will also require at times, to challenge the values of our current age – calling for justice, for concern for the poor and marginalised; to question how resources are used in our name, for example on military spending, to challenge the bombardment and killing of innocent civilians, to seek environmental justice and to ensure that all are included, have a voice and are made welcome.

In this context, I am mindful that I am only speaking to you today as priest, because of courage and determination of those who for over a hundred years, sought to bring about the ordination of women in the Church of England.

For I grew up within the Church of England in which there were no women deacons, priests or bishops. Indeed, there were very few women in any representative role at all, apart from a few Readers as well as deaconesses who, despite their significant role, were treated from the point of view of church governance, as laity. Women were also largely absent from the liturgy of the church which referred to 'all men'.

Change did come as a result of many years of raising questions, campaigning and exploring this through a process of discernment in the life of the Church. It was a long and at many times, a painful process during which a number of women faced prejudice, discrimination and in many cases, vocations not fulfilled. We rejoice today now that women can be ordained as deacons, priests and bishops.

It was also though, a grace-filled period in which we learnt that this is far more than securing the ministry of ordained women in the church but is also about our identify, as women, made, like men, in the image of God and to see how that could be expressed in a more inclusive way in theology and in our liturgy including the hymns and other music we use. I'm delighted that in this service today that our anthem will be a version of the Magnificat by Sarah Macdonald – the first time, I think I have ever heard this great song of Mary composed by a woman. Thank you Mark and the choir for this.

How does God equip us for the task of mission? It's probably fair to think that most of us can feel quite daunted about how we live out our Christian calling. So how does God help us to do this? First of all, we need to root ourselves on God as the very source of our life. Just as our phones won't last very long without charging, nor will we go very far without seeking God and listening to Him, in prayer, through the scriptures, through worship.

And it is in the Eucharist that our encounter with God is most vital. For this is where we come into God's presence -, where we enter into Christ's sacrifice of love and offer ourselves, just as we are, to be taken, blessed, broken, renewed in Christ and equipped by Him to bring his love to those who are in desperate need of it.

God also calls us to go on learning so that we can feel confident to share our faith. Just as at work we would not get very far if we failed to learning about the products and services we are providing and the changing environments in which we are doing this, so too, we need to go on learning as Christians more about our faith so that we can share this with others.

And finally:

What resolution will each of make today to do this? I invite you for a couple of minutes, to reflect where you think God is calling you to be His ambassador this week? What situations or relationships are you aware of that call for God's love, healing and reconciliation to be brought to them? What gift of grace do you need to ask God for today to enable you to do this?

Have a couple of moments' silence.

End with a prayer of +John Pritchard

God of glory and unquenchable Spirit,
May your Son direct us afresh to the fire of your presence
Where nothing may amaze us more than your love,
Nothing inspire us more than your forgiveness and nothing dazzle us more than your
beauty,
Disclosed to us in your world, your story and your Son
Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Canon Daphne Green