

Bishop's Sermon – Thursday 21st April 2011

This occasion enables us to express not only our solidarity in ministry but also the affection in which we hold each other. If that sounds exclusive, then notice that I have not referred, yet, to the licensed ministry which many of us share; if it sounds sentimental, then hear me say how I hope and trust that our understanding of being one in Christ and united in his service, is not a matter of sentiment, because we are called together in the bonds of a love, which this Week shows so clearly, involves cost and generosity, even sacrifice.

So, at a gathering which is a special delight for a bishop, surrounded by licensed Readers and lay ministers, deacons, priests, and bishop, I thank you not only for your welcome of Sally and me as I both share and lead us in service, but also to thank you for the generosity of your ministry, which is always costly. Voluntary or stipendiary, with dependants or not, I express my gratitude, and ours on behalf of my colleagues, for your ministry and for the support of those closest to you, whom I hope you will thank for me. You have come here to thank God; please do not neglect to thank those whom God has given who sustain us by their friendship and love.

We should put this service into perspective. This occasion is, bluntly, less important than the services of the next three days as we tread the way of the cross to resurrection. As we renew our commitment to authorised ministry we recall that the renewal of baptismal vows, which many of us will make on Easter Day, is much more important. Baptism is theologically prior to being Admitted, Ordained or Licensed; it is the sacrament of belonging and the sacrament for ministry. Today's celebration is subordinate to that and why the supportive presence of other lay people – churchwardens, family, youth and children's workers, teachers, musicians, members of congregations - ministers also of the gospel, is so welcome today and so significant. That perspective is crucial to a proper understanding of our vocation and ministry for mission – which is the calling of all God's people. You are our colleagues and partners, not those to whom we delegate the tedious bits. And to be reminded of the centrality of baptism to belonging and to ministry is an antidote to any view of the church which too tightly limits the boundaries of belonging.

Today's gospel highlights how some want to constrain God's grace, then and now. This is quite clearly an account of Jesus' meeting with two sinners, though only one is named as such. An unidentified woman comes without invitation into a pharisee's house as Jesus sits at the table. She is, we read, a sinner but no detail is given. God forgive us for how often preachers and

commentators have assumed her to be a prostitute and hideously, if unthinkingly, linked her gender with sexual immorality. She comes prepared for her encounter with Jesus with an alabaster jar of ointment she has just bought. She says nothing but does plenty. She weeps, bathes Jesus' feet, dries them with her hair, and kisses them, and anoints them. She does not simply make up for the host's lack of hospitality, she goes much further.

By contrast the host, Simon the Pharisee, does less than he should and says more than enough to reveal his true character. He finds her presence a scandal and her generosity to Jesus, and his to her, deeply shocking. He dared to think he knew "what kind of woman this is...a sinner." And Jesus reminds Simon with that parable about two debts cancelled of the shocking truth about divine forgiveness and divine grace – that forgiveness and grace are often more than the pious and religious can stomach.

I don't need to spell it out, but God forbid if we as licensed ministers, as 'the professionals', as leaders in ministry, ever begin to be smug or dismissive or suggest we have seen-it-all-before, that we know what kind of person this is. Keep us Lord, attentive and authentic in our response to your divine grace. Save us from institutional piety, from our prejudices, from any weariness about pastoral encounters, and from sliding into conventional responses. In our re-commitments today and in our receiving of the oils which are the signs of God's grace, we open ourselves again to renewal in our sensitivity to God's presence, surprising perhaps but never shocking, in people and in events.

The call of Samuel comes as a surprise both to the boy himself and, we notice, to the experienced priest Eli. We notice in this story how the priestly and the prophetic traditions of ministry are held together. At the priestly sanctuary in Shiloh where Samuel is already "ministering to the Lord under Eli... whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see" we read not only of failing physical sight but of declining spiritual insight also. In the end, at the third time of asking Eli perceived that it was the Lord calling Samuel in a way so reminiscent of the prophets. In the emerging new leadership, in the ministry of Samuel, priesthood and prophecy must be united.

That is literally fleshed out, perfected, in Jesus, 'prophet, priest and King divine'. First, we notice, Jesus discerns Simon's unspoken criticism of the women with the perfume, reported to us by the gospel, but not spoken aloud. There's irony in Simon thinking to himself, "If this man were a prophet..." for indeed he is. Second, Jesus teaches with powerful insight in the striking parable about the cancelling of two debts of such differing magnitude, directly addressing the situation of the two sinners with him at the supper table. Thirdly, Jesus proclaims divine forgiveness with clarity and charity, in contrast to the reluctance of Simon to speak what he was thinking and his tentative, grudging admission that the bigger debtor would be most grateful for release from his obligation. We pray today for discernment, for insight, for clarity with charity.

The Christian minister is called to be both priest and prophet regardless of his or her title, whatever it says on the Licence, and whether or not we hold one. Those who share the bishop's ministry of encouragement, teaching and leadership have a special privilege and responsibility. As I thank you for your ministry and as we thank God for this vocation, we pray that we may be worthy of our calling in Jesus Christ, prophet, priest and Lord.