

Session Three:

Ephesians 4. 4-16

As Readers, you are called to a very special ministry of bringing the Word of God to people and bringing people to the Word of God. Whatever else you do, the Word is at the heart of being a licensed Reader. I want to take this opportunity to honour and give due recognition to all of you who give so much to the Church through your service as Readers.

From the uncertain beginnings of Reader ministry in 1561 when Readers were forbidden to preach or interpret the word of God, on to today where there are now around 10,000 episcopally-licensed Readers in the Church of England, the ministry of Reader has undergone some transformative changes. Back in 1561, your forebears were permitted to read the appointed service "plainly, distinctly and audibly" in those "poorer parishes destitute of incumbents". They were required to read a chapter of the Old Testament and one from the New Testament daily, to move 'men' to quiet and concord and not to give them reason for offence. They were to be sober in apparel, especially in church. You only need to look at some of the gear worn by readers these days to see how much things have changed! By the twentieth century a number of 'classes' of Reader had emerged: 'Parochial Readers', nominated by the incumbent of a parish and licensed by the bishop to minister in that parish; and 'Diocesan Readers' commissioned by the bishop to officiate in any parish at the request of the incumbent. 'Scriptural Readers' and 'Catechists' came to be granted Reader licences in time which is why we do not find these ministries exercised in Britain today, though they are widely used in many other parts of the world. The most numerous group were the 'Lay Evangelists' or 'Lay Preachers' who developed alongside Reader ministry until they also were given Readers licences. Preaching by Readers at the end of Evensong, after a suitable pause, became common following World War I, but Readers were not formally permitted to use the pulpit until 1941. This was not a great problem in earlier years as much preaching by Readers was conducted in the open air as Evangelists. But while some things have changed, other parts of the Readers' role have remained constant. Speaking in 1884 at the Canterbury Convocation the then Bishop of Bangor said Readers were "Christians who can bridge over the gap between the different classes of society; who by being in close communication with the clergymen on the one hand and the industrious masses on the other, can interpret each to each".

In the engagement between the world and the Church, Readers are in the front line;

they may often be the first to hold a conversation on what the Church might say about the news last night, about the Da Vinci Code, The God Delusion, or about what God might do to sort out local issues of importance.

Let's turn to the New Testament: Ephesians 4. Saint Paul begins this part of the letter by a statement of the universality of the Christian gospel: "One body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father ...". For the Apostle, there's no suggestion of the post-modern tendency to say, "This is the gospel *for me*, but you can choose the gospel for you." The good news, and the framework of belief which surrounds it is not negotiable because it's universal, it's catholic.

That doesn't mean that our individual responsibility is overlooked because each one of us has been given a special gift. Not, in this instance, the many gifts which surround us all – life, family, friends, church, home, food, and so on – because here the writer is referring to the special life-gift bestowed on each one of us, the gift which is closely related to God's call to you. It's a gift from the bounty of Christ who descended to our human life and has ascended to fill the universe.

What are these callings for which Christ has gifted us?

- Apostles: people who keep the Church facing outwards, moving outwards in mission. If bishops claim in any way to be apostolic, they must be people of mission, in the words of Dr Donald Coggan, people through whom "the gospel reverberates".
- Prophets: those who have a special ear for God's word for today and are fearless in passing on that word to us.
- Evangelists: people who share the good news in a public way with a world which more-and-more hungers for meaning, for spiritual life, for forgiveness and for purpose; people who share the gospel that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself".
- Pastors and teachers: probably most of you see yourselves in this role, caring for people in your local community and teaching the way of the Lord to the faithful. It is the traditional Anglican 'pastoral model' of ministry, and we certainly still need pastorally-minded teachers. Yet we need to avoid falling into the trap of being a Church which just cares for its own, rather than sharing God's love in a needy world. That's why we're planning for pioneer ordained ministry and ought to be thinking also of pioneer Reader ministry, too.

All this is to equip the saints, for work in God's service¹, for building up the body of Christ which Saint Paul here describes as the head, with ourselves as the limbs and organs. But for what purpose? To nurture a "mature humanity measured by the full stature of Christ". And what is the test of that purpose? That we won't be distracted, disorientated and disturbed, "whirled around by every fresh gust of teaching", for we are to "maintain the truth is a spirit of love".

A greedy concept

I avoid describing body-of-Christ-discipleship as 'ministry', that word which keeps finding its way into every thought for the renewal of the Church's life: "Ministry," wrote Helen Oppenheimer, "is a greedy concept." In the simplest and most basic sense, 'ministry' simply describes our being servants - though there are those who would question whether this is a sufficiently nuanced translation. Of course, the word can be stretched, like so many theological terms so that numerous aspects of the Christian life are drawn into a single concept, in consequence evacuating the word 'ministry' of any real meaning and allowing individuals to peddle their own interpretations. This is not new: we all know about the abuse of words. Almost anything can be described as 'mission' or 'worship', 'stewardship' or 'evangelism' and in a pure sense it would be accurate to do so, but if we are to express ourselves meaningfully, we need to restrict and specify the meaning of the words we use. 'Ministry' is such a word.

I need to enter a caution. A great deal of very valuable work has gone on in recent years to remind the Church of fundamental principles of public ministry and to introduce us to new ways of working, and that is all to the good; a living Church demands committed, well-trained, well-treated and accountable public ministers. That's not the issue here.

Even though we're slowly growing out of the idea that the laity are 'helping the priest' or the priests are 'delegating to the laity', there is little doubt that 'ministry' still retains, in most people's hearing, the echo that it is to do with service within the Church or on behalf of the Church: it is, deep down, *Church* ministry. Now at the same time as 'ministry' has appeared to consume other aspects of Church life, so our thinking has been subtly internalised. For instance, evangelism easily gets re-badged as 'ministry', something the

¹ Please note the comma after "the saints" and before "for work in God's service". That may seem a pedantic interpretation of the text but my reasons are that our understanding of '*diakonos*' (service) has changed a good deal in recent years as a result of the studies of the Roman Catholic lay theologian John N Collins.

Church can do to bring more people *in* and save herself, rather than simply the outward sharing of the priceless good news in Christ for the benefit of all, an aspect of the priesthood of all believers. The heart of the gospel can easily become: 'God so loved the church that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may minister collaboratively'.

A discussion about the word 'ministry' may appear to be pedantic and a futile dispute, but I contend that it sheds light on a *fourth theological issue*. Those of us who've been around for a while have spent some of our time getting more people deeper involved in aspects of the 'ministry' of the Church, but it's taken a while for us in our part of the world to notice that, while far more Christians are 'ministering', fewer people wish to belong to the Church (dramatically fewer young people). Encouraging 'all Christians to be ministers', 'every member ministry' and 'the ministry of the baptized' ought to be harmless alternatives to speaking of 'discipleship' and 'Christian service'. But they have come to mean much more: these expressions carry the hidden question, 'What are you doing *for the Church?*' That's a very serious problem in a church like ours which is, in its bowels, pastoral rather than missionary. A far more vital and meaningful concept than 'lay ministry', particularly in our context, is 'discipleship', which is at the very heart of our common calling as Christians and carries no overtones of distinction between lay and ordained.

The extravagant use of 'ministry' is disabling discipleship and I conclude from the general disillusionment with the institutional Church that people have noticed this internalising tendency and don't want to belong to such an apparently useless and self-orientated organisation. I'm convinced that the reason so few teenagers and younger adults want anything to do with us is not post-modernism, not secularism, not any -ism: they don't think the church is any use! Of course, I recognise that basic integrity is an important *positive* factor in our favour, and all these -isms which lead to alienation from organised religion are important *negative* factors. Yet I observe self-preserving parts of the institutional Church generally in decline while those which are more visionary and less defensive are experiencing growth. For me, it all points towards the same basic problem in the declining church to which I have referred before: internalisation.

If we are to begin to equip a people for God's mission, we need to raise the standards of theological literacy in the Churches, to improve our understanding of the Bible and to increase our ability to think about what faith means in daily living; and the ministry of Readers and others will be vital. Your ministry of the Word needs to be "theology from

people who are on fire". A Methodist Church selection panel was interviewing a candidate for the ministry. The candidate, who was a shy young man, explained that he would never set the River Thames on fire. "My dear young brother," replied Dr. W.E. Sangster, "I'm not interested to know if you could set the Thames on fire. What I want to know is this: if I picked you up by the scruff of your neck and dropped you into the Thames, would it sizzle?"

So we are looking to you and your sisters and brothers in ministry across the world to raise our ability as Anglican Christians to handle the Word. It's regrettable that in so many of our churches, the only contact people have with the Bible is two or three readings on Sunday; if they're lucky, they get these printed out for them on a notice-sheet. But the way we hear the Bible read in church can tell us everything about the priority – or lack of it – that we give to the Word. For instance, we decorate and illuminate the altar and treat it with great reverence, but we read the Bible from a piece of paper, standing on the chancel step, squeezed in between liturgical items which leave no time for the Word to sink in and deepen. No wonder that the Scriptures lack the honour they deserve. More importantly, no wonder we don't know most of what's in the Bible and are fearful about applying it to our daily lives. I'd like to return to the day when we encouraged Anglicans to bring their Bibles to church or when parishes put Bibles in the pews, so that we could handle the Book itself once more, to encourage parishes to publish the 'Reading-a-day' which is readily available on the internet or from the 'Anglican Cycle of Prayer'.

The prophets called the people to measure themselves by God's standard of wisdom, to "Listen to the Word of the Lord!" As Readers, you are called to this rewarding but demanding ministry of the Word of God, what Donald Coggan called "this joyful tyranny". First, listen to the Word yourself, then be willing to obey it, and, finally, pass it on! Thomas Carlyle once asked the question: "Who, having been called to be a preacher, would stoop to be a king?"

Robert Paterson