

2012 6th October Admission and Licensing of Lay Ministers

Old Testament Reading	Proverbs 8.4-11
New Testament reading	2 Timothy 3.12-end
Gospel reading	Luke 10.17-24

In the presentation of the Candidates for Admission to the office of licensed Lay Minister I called upon those who have been entrusted with their selection and preparation to declare that they are of Christian character, well versed in the Holy Scripture and in the doctrines of our faith. That would have delighted William Tyndale, whom we remember with today with thanksgiving. It was Tyndale who wanted his translation of the Bible into English to be direct and dramatic. He shouted at a conservative with whom he was arguing: “If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more scripture than thou dost.” With ‘power and lightening’, as the gospel said of the 70 returning from their mission!

At this safe distance, we need to remind ourselves that when in 1522 Tyndale conceived of translating the Bible into English, he did not receive much support, especially from the bishops. Indeed the climate of this country was so hostile to him that from 1524 he lived abroad. He died in 1536, near Brussels, probably on 6th October; having been imprisoned he was strangled and burnt at the stake.

Tyndale’s translation was as staggering an intellectual achievement as it was an act of great courage. As so often with change, what was at first vehemently opposed took root and came to be accepted. At least three quarters of the King James Version of 1611 was based on Tyndale’s English Bible.

At first I said what you thought was impossible; then I argued you were wrong; but now it is what I always believed.

In our pluralist world of many faiths those of us called to minister in the name of Jesus Christ, lay and ordained, will be strengthened and supported by our engagement with Scripture and doctrine so that we can more ably read and navigate the signs of the times. In our preaching and conversation, above all in our actions, what do we have to say that is good news about love and the meaning of life, in times of joy and sorrow? How are we of, for or with the poor? What does it mean to be forgiven and to forgive and can we start again? What is eternal and lasts forever?

Nowadays our concern is that the child on their iPad knows so little of the Bible and the Christian faith. Like Tyndale, we ‘Open the Book’ to pass on the stories and kindle the faith but it is in community, in our relationships with one another that faith

is caught and becomes passionate. What we believe matters: it shapes our characters, our values and our society.

Most of you know that until last year I was a London parish priest. Friends wondered if after 16 years in Trafalgar Square we would find Salisbury too quiet. On the first night here, after the removal men and visitors had gone, we stopped and listened to the quiet and thought the silence a very welcome change. I have enjoyed getting to know the diocese, its character and history. That Christianity took root here in Roman times gives the Church depth. It is wonderful that probably the earliest known image of Christ is from the floor of a Roman villa at Hinton St Mary in Dorset. The parish system has rooted the Christian church in every local community. There is a rich Saxon history with Saints Aldhelm and Cuthberga, men and women in authority in the Church and in a way that speaks to us today. In the foundation of the cathedral at Old Sarum, St Osmund uniquely included Saxons *and* Normans on an equal basis, sharing power and including people who are different in the life of the Church because that is what the Gospel requires of us. The Sarum liturgy influenced the Church across the whole of Western and Northern Europe: worship is at the heart of our common life. In its formative years the Church of England was shaped in this Diocese by the likes of John Jewel, Richard Hooker and George Herbert: inclusive, open to the world, Godly, reasonable. A confident tolerant faith has made space here for others to flourish; from seventeenth century bishops turning a blind eye to Roman Catholicism to a variety of contemporary renewal movements proclaiming Christ in Word and deed. To one of his rather brooding paintings of Salisbury Cathedral, now in the National Gallery, John Constable added a rainbow, the church representing and ministering God's covenant with all creation. We have a great calling as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

The office and work of a licensed Lay Minister is important. You minister with the authority of the Church and you are, of course, highly trained. Your commitment and effort can be humbling for those of us who work with you.

Ministry is often joyful and rewarding. The more you give, the more you receive. The person who is forgiven much will love much, and so on. Ministry can also be arduous and difficult. The pattern of Jesus is of costly, sacrificial love. The Church and the minister that walks away from that lacks credibility. It is the witness of the martyr and why we remember William Tyndale today. So I suggest we should be sceptical about what the Director of Training said that, "these candidates are *sufficiently* prepared for the duties of this office". How can any of us be sufficiently prepared to follow Christ? This great building tells us exactly that: what we called to is much bigger than each of us. Could we ever be *sufficiently* prepared?

The twelve disciples are a great encouragement. They were slow to understand, argumentative, inconstant and at times faithless. Yet the risen Christ called those who were willing to try again into a community of the resurrection and through the gift of the Holy Spirit they were empowered: some to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers.... to witness that God was in Christ reconciling the world. It is a high calling for which we are woefully unprepared, save by Christ himself.

Be prayerful in all you do and use your energy, intelligence and imagination. We live in interesting times and it is easy to understand why the Chinese say that is a curse.

In the Diocese of Salisbury something like 27,000 people go to the Church of England each week. As a proportion of the total population that is the second highest of any diocese in the Church of England; 2.9%. At Christmas and Easter 130,000 come to church; 14.6%. There is no doubt in my mind that we are under-describing ourselves and our reach into the wider society; *and* there is no doubt that we have a problem as an organisation about numbers belonging to Church.

In common with the C of E as a whole, we need to grow in numbers and depth. We won't grow in numbers, and won't deserve to grow, unless we are willing to be deep Church.

What is needed is prayerful imagination, and faithful courage to experiment and try what is new so that the Church may proclaim afresh the Christian faith in this generation. This is different to the institutional and organisational questions, but it is connected.

A few weeks ago the College of Bishops received a paper about re-imagining ministry. It was not received positively but I came to the conclusion that whoever had produced it would have failed. It is a difficult task. A lot of books are emerging to help. My favourite title so far is Gordon Oliver's 'Ministry without Madness'. The title gives a clue as to one aspect of the problem. We need to build one another up to the full stature of Christ, seeking maturity and what it is to be God's people in Jesus Christ.

Our readings today are helpful. From Proverbs, acquire intelligence and don't think ministry will make you rich in silver or gold. This is the Church of England. What is being pointed to is a universal truth that wisdom is better than jewels.

From the 2nd letter to Timothy, continue in what you have learned and to be schooled by the Scriptures to be equipped for every good work. That is why you have been carefully prepared for this ministry and why learning is lifelong.

From the Gospel of Luke and the sending out and return of the seventy, do so *with joy*. Belief involves passion, in the sense of having a strong faith and suffering for it. But

be open to humility that like the disciples you might not always know, see and understand; that sometimes God's gracious will is hidden from the wise and intelligent and well prepared, and revealed to infants. Try to hold to the possibility of the Gospel pattern that God is often known most clearly by the poor, the stranger, the outsider.

Perhaps above all remember that we are a community of Christians, not just dependent on the grace and love of Christ but on one another; clergy and lay people working together with different gifts and roles. Remember that you are licensed for ministry by the Church and for the world, and that who you are and what you do matter deeply.

Yours is a high calling, as is the calling to be a bishop, priest or deacon. Clergy and lay people together to pray for, work for, witness to God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen