

Jan 13th 2019, Baptism of Christ, 30th anniversary of Reader Licensing

O God, help us to listen to your word with understanding, to receive it with faith and to obey it with courage. Amen

I don't often start a sermon with a biblical text, and I am not going to do so today, but I would like to start by looking at a hymn. Please could you turn to hymn number 625, which we will be singing as our offertory hymn today.

It is eminently suitable as an offertory hymn because it summarises what we are all offering to God, and what I have tried to offer for most of my life, and particularly during the last 30 years as a Reader. Each verse of this hymn suggests at least two ways in which we can offer ourselves. So please, when you sing it. don't just go into auto-pilot, but really think about the words, especially the first verse: Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee.

Thirty years ago, on Saturday January 11th 1989, I was licensed by Bishop Mark as a Reader in the Church of England. I can remember the day clearly. My husband (a lay clerk in the cathedral choir), our children (both servers at All Saints), and my brother and sister-in-law (on holiday from Australia) were there in the Cathedral to see me given my blue scarf and my copy of the New Testament. I was then licensed to preach, teach and lead worship, and encouraged to do anything else within the realm of education and pastoral work which my incumbent asked of me.

I have survived three incumbents telling me what to do, and two inter-regnums where the curate, I and the other Readers did as we liked.

I have described before how I came to be a Reader. We had had a parish conference, organised by the then vicar, John de Wit, where we identified a number of tasks in the education / pastoral field which needed to be done and I seemed to hear a voice saying to me "You could do these". I went to see John, and we explored the various forms of ministry which I might undertake. I was the mother of two teen-aged children, I was also teaching part time, and I personally felt that the ordained ministry was not for me, so I applied for Reader training. I also remember vividly the day I spent at the selection conference, feeling that I had been skinned, turned inside out, and put back together again. When I got home, feeling absolutely shattered, it was to discover that Ian had managed to break a pane of glass in the greenhouse, and had cut his hand rather badly. The children had done their best in my absence with bandages and TLC, but he and I spent the rest of the day at Selly Oak A&E. I did wonder whether God was trying to tell me something.

I was accepted, however, and spent the best part of the next two years in theological training to equip me to fulfil my role as a lay person, living out my faith both in the world of work and in this church. At the time, and I think still now, Readers were encouraged to see their role as a bridge between the secular world and the “churchy” world. We are not poor substitutes for the ordained ministry, but have a particular role of our own.

So how do I see my ministry, after 30 years? The part which I was most fearful about was preaching. For more years than I care to remember, I had stood in front of a class of teenagers, and had taught them science (and also RE, for a brief period). They were a captive audience, who knew they had to be there, and I had the advantage of being older than they were. Preaching to a congregation of people who were older, wiser and more experienced than I, was a different matter. What could I say that they had not heard before? John de Wit gave me so much help there. He encouraged me to develop my own style of preaching, and also said that every sermon had to include, somewhere, an element of the Good News, that people could take away with them at the end of the service, when we are bidden to “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord”.

I know that certainly over the last 20 years, during which I have been on my own, that many of my sermons have reflected my travels. I have tried to share with you the sights I have seen and the people that I have met. Gold-panning in New Zealand, the painted monasteries of Romania, farming in Ecuador, travelling the Trans-Siberian railway - these are some of the experiences that I have shared with you, as well as aspects of my life as a teacher, a widow, and as a grandmother.

I hope I have not been too indulgent in my reminiscences, but have perhaps at least captured your attention at the beginning of my sermons.

So, where is the Good News this week?

The word ‘Gospel’ means ‘good news’, so what is today’s gospel about?

It tells us about the baptism of Jesus by John the baptizer. John was the son of the cousin of Jesus’s mother, a relative. John must have realised that his own birth was something special, and that Jesus’s birth was even more so. John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He promised that if people would repent of their sins, his cleansing of their bodies would be a sign of the cleansing of their souls from guilt. He also preached that he was only the fore-runner, and that as he baptized with water, there was one to come who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit which would manifest itself in tongues of fire, cleansing in a different way. The other manifestation of the Holy Spirit is as a dove, which Luke records as having descended on Jesus at the time of his baptism.

I believe that it was the Holy Spirit within me, acting as a little flame that burst into life when I felt the call to do something in God's name. I believe that we all possess this little flame of the Holy Spirit, like a sort of pilot light, waiting to burst into full flame, given the oxygen and the fuel that it needs to burn. John the baptizer must have possessed this power of the Holy Spirit, this power that existed from the beginning of time. The creation story at the beginning of Genesis tells of the wind of God, moving over the face of the waters when the earth was a formless void. I do not wish to get embroiled in the Big Bang Theory, but something must have triggered the initial expansion of the universe, and if we believe in a creator God, then the force that triggered the big bang could also appear as a wind or as a flame of fire.

Life could not appear on earth until water was present, so both a force – the Holy Spirit, and water – the water of baptism, are necessary for us to be born again as children of God.

We who have been baptized into the church, the body of Christ, are bidden to walk in the light of Christ all the days of our lives. We are commissioned at the end of each Eucharist to 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord'.

It is up to each one of us to ask how we are called to serve. We are certainly not all called to be members of the ordained ministry. We are not all called to be lay ministers – Readers or those licenced in pastoral care. We are not all called to be musicians or workers with children. Our service may be to greet other worshippers with a smile and a hymnbook, or to give them a cup of coffee afterwards. It may be to make sure that the church building is warm and clean for worship. We may be called to talk with people who do not yet know the love of God or of his church.

What we are asked to do is to take on board the words of today's offertory hymn, and to ask God to take our lives, our hands, our voices, our money, our wills and our love, and to use whatever of those God can use to his service, and to the service of our neighbours.

And the Good News, which for thirty years I have tried to include in every sermon?

In today's final hymn:

Go forth and tell, God's love embraces all.