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20th Anniversary of Women's Ordination to Priesthood in Wales

Brecon Cathedral

Refs: Ruth; John 25

*May I speak in the name of God, Source of All Being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit.
Amen.*

It is a great honour and joy to be invited to preach here today, for a whole host of reasons – and many of those reasons remind me of what a privilege it is to be here as an ordained priest in God's church: of any gender, and in any Province of the Anglican Communion, or any country in the world.

Because as you might just still be able to tell, I'm not Welsh by birth. As I learned to say in my 1st Welsh lessons, *dwi'n dod yn wreiddiol o Lloegr* (I'm from England originally): I arrived here some 5½ years ago as a result of a job ad in the *Church Times*; but it seems to be where I belong, so I'm very conscious of being 'Welsh by grace and adoption' – as I'm sure St Paul would have said!

I am also not a cradle Anglican: I was born into the Salvation Army, where my parents were officers at the time; and I was confirmed into the Church of England in 1977 – at which point, I now understand, women could not even be Lay Readers in the CofE – and I have to say, had I known that at the time, it might have influenced my decision! But having roots in a different Christian tradition, which has always recognised the equality of women and had women in its ministry, I have always known the richness of a ministry embodied in the partnership between men and women – so I've always been very much aware of the importance of the struggles of sisters in other parts of our family of faith – and aware too, that for some, that struggle is still going on.

And finally, I am part of that 'blessed generation' which has seen women in the C... of E... and the C... in W... move, officially, into every area of ministry: from Church Army Sisters and Deaconesses to Deacons, and then Priests, and now of course even Bishops. I was training for the ministry in England when the vote went through the General Synod to ordain women to the priesthood – and as that historic day fell on a lecture night on the Northern Ordination Course where I trained, there was a memorable moment when our whoops and cheers as the news came in so much disturbed the students in the next classroom at Leeds University (who were

not training for ordination) that they came in and complained about the noise!

So I was in the first cohort to know that if all went well I would go straight through from training, to ordination as a Deacon, and then as a Priest. And I have to confess to feeling particularly pleased and proud that if we were a little behind our brothers and sisters in England in ordaining women priests, we were ahead of them in voting for women Bishops; and in this historic anniversary year, we are about to consecrate our first woman, for the ancient, historic See of St Davids – but chosen from this very Diocese.

So as I was here by the time of the 20th Anniversary of women priests in England, I'm extra delighted to be part of the celebrations in Wales today!

This celebration falls, as did those first Priestly ordinations in 1997, at the Feast of the Epiphany – and I think this is a particularly appropriate festival. Our Gospel today reminds us of the commissioning by Jesus himself of the very 1st witness to the Resurrection, Mary Magdalen, as Apostle to the Apostles: "*Go and tell my brothers...*" But the Epiphany is the 'demonstration' or manifestation, of Jesus to the Gentiles – in other words, to the whole world, not just to the 'usual suspects' of the Chosen People. And that was an idea at least as revolutionary, as much a turning of the world upside down, as the ordination of women to the priesthood.

Of course, as we all know, if the 3 Wise Men whose visit we recall at Epiphany had been 3 Wise Women, they would have asked directions instead of following a star; they would have arrived on time; they would have brought practical gifts like nappies and baby-clothes; and they would have left a casserole for the Virgin Mary and the Holy Family. But in a radio talk in the week before Xmas, the theologian Prof Robert Beckford made a convincing case for at least 1 of the Wise Men being a woman, after all.

It's always a good way to win points in a pub quiz to know that nowhere in the Bible does it say that there were 3 Wise Men. There weren't necessarily 3; they were learned but they may or may not have been wise; and Robert Beckford noted that the Greek plural word for Magi could include female as well as male characters.

He also observed that St Matthew's Gospel seems to make rather a point of saying that the Magi visited 'the child and his mother': there is no reference to Joseph. It would have been completely out of the question for a bunch of chaps to visit a nubile young mother without a female chaperone; but if there had been women

amongst the Magi, there would have been no problem: so all that business about 'the child and his mother' might just be a hint that there was a learned woman amongst the visitors.

Furthermore, said Prof Beckford, if the Magi were, as current scholarship suggests, Zoroastrians, then this was a religion that employed female priests: not just as rather dodgy fertility-cult functionaries, but in the proper liturgical and theological and scholarly sense.

But whatever the composition of the original Magi, those of us who are now priests are only too conscious of the Wise Women who went ahead of us, and that we stand in a long tradition of faithful women who devoted their lives to the love and service of the Lord – even if, for many generations, their true vocations went unrecognised. I'm not sure that I would have stuck it out if I had actually heard those often-reported words from the early days of women's struggle towards the sacramental ministry, that "*The only time a woman should be in the sanctuary is if she's on her knees cleaning.*" Or even from the days when it was openly said that women were particularly unsuited to celebrating the sacraments because of our bodily functions, and in particular, because of the demands made on us by our very bodily engagement in the conception, gestation, birth and nurture of children.

Which is very odd when you come to think about it, because the whole point of the Xian story is that God was a flesh-and-blood human being; that in Jesus, God was incarnate, embodied, in human flesh, and born of a woman.

The distinctive part of priesthood is of course celebrating the sacraments; and what is a sacrament? All together now: an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace!

Or in practical terms, a sacrament is about using ordinary, everyday stuff to show something of the Kingdom of God, the reality of heaven – and there's nothing more incarnational than that. However many sacraments you recognise – 2 or 3 or 7 or whatever, depending on your tradition – have you ever noticed how many of them so closely reflect the basic, life-sustaining activities of human life? Baptism with its immersion in or pouring-over of water is of course reminiscent of birth; but it's also pretty obviously a reference to washing – and especially bathing a baby. Holy Communion is explicitly modelled on a meal; and even though in our church it's reduced to a minute sip of wine and a tokenistic wafer, I was truly taken aback to realise,

when I first learnt how to administer the chalice, that it felt to me exactly the same as helping my children to drink from a cup, when they were tiny. Even the anointing of the dying – Extreme Unction – reflects the ancient practice of cleansing and preparing a body for burial with fragrant oils and spices: women’s work, just as Mary Magdalen and her friends were preparing to do for Jesus when they went to the tomb on the 1st Easter Day.

Childbirth, washing, preparing food, feeding, tending the sick and even dealing with dead bodies are all tasks that have traditionally fallen to women: so how could it not make sense for us also to minister the sacraments?

But there is more to the ordination of women as priests, and now also to the consecration of women as Bishops, even than simple justice and the recognition of human rights – important though that is in the world made by God, and all humanity in God’s image. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for in Christ every barrier had been broken down, and nothing – nothing in all creation, not race or nationality or culture or tradition or suffering or privilege – can separate us from the love of God made manifest (there’s the Epiphany again) in Jesus Christ. Since that is so, then our Christian, our Christ-like, ministry must also reflect that fullness of God, which is not confined to either male or female.

If we restrict the sacramental ministry to male or female or any other subset of the human race, we risk presenting an impression of God which is partial and limited, and fails to reflect the fullness of God which God and our scriptures go to such trouble to reveal. The fullness of God can be reflected only when the whole of our human race in all its glorious and God-given diversity can be recognised as ministers of God’s love in every aspect: pastoral, practical, theological, liturgical, and sacramental.

For Christ Jesus, through whom God made the world, *'is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation ... all things have been created through him and for him ... and in him all things hold together.'* (Col 1:14-16)

So, to God be the glory, now and for ever.

Amen.