

Sermon for 20th anniversary of women priests

Ruth 1:16-18 John 20:11-18

I'm not someone who often quotes Margaret Thatcher... but she did once have an unforgettable moment in Prime Minister's Question Time. Fixing her opponents with the 'death stare' she informed them "You turn if you want- the lady's not for turning".

It's a serious judgement call, knowing when to stand firm and when to do something entirely different and unexpected. We've had stories today about women who did turn, whose lives changed direction. We heard our 'living letters' from Sally and Suzanne about how they came to be ordained: Sally priested after many years of struggle as a deacon; Suzanne, God willing, to be priested this summer, one year on from when she was made deacon.

And then we had our biblical stories of two women whom God called to step out of their comfort zone and into the unknown.

There's Ruth- she'd never been to Bethlehem in her life. She was a good Moabite girl who'd done her duty by her husband and her in-laws. Now she was widowed, and everyone expected her to go back to her family home. But Ruth makes a choice to defy expectations, to leave the security of all that is familiar to care for Naomi, and she makes that wonderful promise: "where you go I will go", binding herself in covenant to her mother in law and so becoming a gift to all God's people- the ancestor of King David and ultimately of Jesus Christ.

Then there's Mary Magdalene. She'd had her life turned round once when she'd been healed and called by Jesus.

We assume Ruth had experience on which to draw, the 'transferable skills' of family life to prepare her for the brave new world of being a single woman, bread-winner and carer in Bethlehem. But about Mary Magdalene, we know next to nothing- unless you believe what you read in the trashy novels. We know that she'd had her demons, and that Jesus had enabled her to deal with them. So no wonder that she stands at his tomb and weeps for her loss.

Interesting isn't it? John's gospel had earlier described Jesus standing weeping outside the tomb of his friend Lazarus, so maybe we should see something Christ-like in her even at this moment...

But tears are not enough. Mary needs to move on. Jesus needs her to move on. And so this lady turns. Literally turns. And sees Jesus.

How wonderful must that moment have been, and no wonder that she wants to hold on to it, to hold on to him. He's not lost but found, not dead but living. Jesus is there for her. For her, not anyone else.

And that's when Jesus turns her life around for the second time. She needs to turn again, to go and tell. This isn't like it was earlier that Easter morning when she'd found the tomb empty and ran to tell the disciples the things she didn't know- they've taken the Lord and I" don't know where they've laid him" This time she goes with dignity, with confidence, with authority: "I have seen the Lord".

What this second turning has done is take Mary out of the private sphere and into the public one. She's not her own person any more, she's Jesus' person, the one whom he's chosen and commissioned. She's become the Apostle to the Apostles.

By-the-by: there's a photo in a little book by Elizabeth Moltmann Wendel of a medieval altarpiece in Lubeck which depicts Mary Magdalene appointing Lazarus as Bishop of Marseilles- his episcopal authority is derived from her apostolic authority! But I digress...

Except that we need to remind ourselves of the range of expectations and possibilities that God has always laid before us. We're not that 'new-fangled' with our 20 years of women priests in the Church in Wales and as we enter this first year with a woman as bishop.

But what I do want to say to all of us gathered here, men as well as women, is that God is always moving us on. God doesn't do the standing-still thing.

You know, we give it a fancy Latin name; we make a virtue of it- the status quo. But it's not God's way. God doesn't send the Holy Spirit to be a straight-jacket, but a fountain of living water, a bright dancing flame, a swirling rush of wind, a swooping dove, a soaring wild goose. God doesn't do standing still. And neither should we.

This 20th anniversary celebration of women priests marks a milestone. But to be faithful to our calling as God's people, women and men, ordained and lay, we need to make that milestone a stepping-stone. I speak to you in particular, my sisters, when I say: you need to step forward in faith. (Let's reclaim that phrase for the whole Church, not let it be commandeered by the minority).

On the cover of our service booklet is a logo made up of the names of all the women ordained 20 years ago. It's in tiny print but if you look carefully, you'll see a little '+' before the name of Joanna Penberthy. It gives me such joy to see that. It's the sign that she's a bishop. (Maybe she's not actually entitled to put it there before 21st of this month – just take it as a word of prophecy from her sisters here!). But you and I all bear that mark. In our baptism we were each marked with the sign of the cross.

I want you now to turn to the person next to you, or in front of you or behind you.

Trace that sign of the cross on their forehead with your thumb... Remind one another what it feels like to be a new Christian, one whom God has chosen and commissioned....

The question is: commissioned to do what?

At this service, women will have read, led the prayers, given their testimonies, presided, assisted and served at the altar, presented the gifts, welcomed you at the door. They are a reminder to us all how many are the roles open to women in leading worship. And that's long before we start to list their possible roles in serving the wider Church and community. The mark of the cross is our commissioning, and this service must be our stepping-stone. For so long we have complained that we have not been given responsibility. The truth is my sisters, we have too often shirked responsibility. "Oh I'm too busy at home/in work/in my local church...Oh no not me, I couldn't begin to see myself doing that..."

The Church is a community of women and men. You, my brothers, have been our friends and colleagues, our encouragers, allies and champions. But if the Church is to move forward, she needs women to move forward.

The comfort zone, the status quo, has had its day. There are new commitments we must make, new courage we must find. There's a life to be lived beyond the pews of our own familiar local church, and God's work to be done in all sorts of unexpected places. We must say with confidence, with dignity, with authority "Where you go, I will go"- and so let the Holy Spirit lead us in her merry dance.