

A CELEBRATION OF A MINISTRY – 28th JULY, 2013.

There are many times of leaving in all our lives; leaving home, to go to college or work, or to get married, leaving jobs, moving house and, in the case of clergy – moving parishes. But today is not like any other farewell. This for me is stepping down from over 35 years of licensed ministry for the Church of England – over twenty years as a Reader and non-stipendary Deacon and priest and fourteen years of stipendary ministry, of which twelve and a half years have been spent here in this group of parishes.

There is much to celebrate today and many people to thank. The future for us is both exciting and daunting – for me there is a new way of life, a new location, a much smaller house and new ways of exercising my priesthood. For you, there is the challenge of the Vacancy and this falls particularly on the Readers and Churchwardens who will be responsible for continuing care in the parishes. I know what this feels like, because I have helped manage vacancies myself. And I have every confidence that this Vacancy will be managed very well indeed. I believe this is the right time for this particular farewell and I would like today to reflect not just on my twelve and a half years as Incumbent here, but on the whole of my ministry.

Some of my favourite passages from the Old Testament are the accounts of God calling prophets and other leaders. It is rather reassuring to hear Jeremiah pleading that he is too young and Moses using the excuse that he is not a good public speaker. The boy Samuel needed the help of the priest Eli to discern that it was God who was calling him in the night and in our first reading it is the feeling of unworthiness that makes Isaiah of Jerusalem hesitate.

I read this passage at the Sunday School Festival Evensong in my home church of St Andrew, Wolverhampton. I was eight and it was the first time I had read in church. I did not fully understand some of the phrases from the Authorised Version and it was years later that I realised that twain meant two, and it was not holy twine suspending the seraphs from Heaven! And yet I did recognise the majesty of this passage as Isaiah described his experience of the presence of God and I knew that he felt unworthy - “ a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips” - unworthy to have been given this experience of God. I also knew that Isaiah had a complete sense of God’s forgiveness when the seraph touches his mouth with the live coal. NOW Isaiah can respond with confidence, when the voice of God asks “Whom shall I send?” - “Here I am, send me”. In that moment, the prophet’s experience was mine; I wanted to respond to God’s call. Our parish had a good record of vocations – my father had just been licensed as

a Lay Reader and a young man had just gone to college to train as a priest. However it never struck me that you had to be a man. My Vicar said, “You never know – things might change....” I trained as a teacher.

But that feeling, that sense of God’s call, never went away – rather it haunted me. I tried not going to church for a while and I decided not to specialise in RE, but ended up teaching it anyway. And, in the most unlikely circumstances, with a baby of three months and our first child not quite three, I was selected for Reader-training. Harold, my Vicar at the time, who is here today, and well-known to many of you through his periods of holiday cover for me, thought it was the best we could do at the time.

I was admitted and licensed to our group of three parishes in Worcester Diocese on October 11th, 1980 and the reading for that service was Isaiah 6, 1-8.

Over the next sixteen years, I served with six incumbents, moving to Hereford Diocese in 1990. It was a long wait and ordination would not have happened without the encouragement of Michael, the Rector of the Leominster Team Ministry where I served. I was ordained Deacon on December 15th, 1996 and priested the following year.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus comes to Galilee and sets out his agenda for ministry and we see four clear elements here:

- Preach the Good News
- Release the captives
- Heal the sick
- Operate in the power of the Spirit.

This agenda applies to all baptised Christians, but it is the privilege and responsibility of those called to licensed ministry to ensure that these things happen in the church community.

Preaching the Good News that God came and shared our human life in Jesus, lived, died and rose again for us, loves and cares for us, whoever we are, whatever we’ve done, calls us by our name and makes us his own, is not just done from the pulpits and lecterns in church buildings.

It can happen round a table in the Vicar’s dining room or indeed anywhere, as the thirty-six of you who have done the 3D course with me and the forty-six people prepared for Confirmation will testify. Preaching the Good News happens in our lay-led Advent and Lent worship, in preparation for Baptism and Marriage, in our monthly all-age workshops, in Reader and Ordinand training and support. Learning how to handle our scriptures, the history of

our faith and using both our minds and our feelings to reflect and lay our story alongside the Christian story involves not letting earth blot out heaven. I thank God today for all the opportunities he has given me to preach the Good News. We cannot be in ministry for what we can get out of it, but to help others to be drawn to Christ's love, to help people become responsible members of Christ's body, not just consumers of religion.

Release of captives is about not being bound up in ourselves, about letting go of our prejudices – it happens in worship at Group Services where we have forgotten which building we are in and are focussed on the God and father of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. It happens at social events, at flower festivals, where fellowship, friendship and engagement with the community suddenly become more important than the amount of money raised. It happens through our giving to those less fortunate than ourselves, at Harvest, Lent Lunches and in a regular percentage from our group accounts. I thank God for the opportunities that God gives us to release ourselves, to “let go and let God”.

When I was asked at my interview here which aspect of ministry I could best offer, I said “Pastoral Care”. Wherever I have served, I have visited the sick at home and in hospital and have had the privilege of administering the Sacrament of Anointing to the dying. I have ministered to a thousand bereaved families, with nearly 600 funerals here. People have come to terms with long-term illness and disability through the laying-on of hands. This ministry has always been supported by lay people, the Pastoral Care Groups and by prayer. People in the church community and beyond want us to pray for them when things are tough, when health is failing, in sorrow and in celebration. I give thanks today for the opportunities God gives us to be part of his healing work and I thank Rose, my Pastoral colleague here.

The final element of Jesus' agenda for ministry in this reading is to “operate in the power of the spirit” and for me that means one thing – the Eucharist, Holy Communion, celebrated today and ever since Jesus said to his disciples, “Do this in remembrance of me”. At the Eucharist we give thanks for the love of God in Jesus Christ, for his life, death and Resurrection, for the outpouring of his Holy Spirit. When we receive the bread and wine or a blessing at the altar rail we are filled with God's Spirit. I remember reading about a church where, as people went forward for Communion, they saw on a screen the words “Come to me all that travail and are heavy-laden”, but when they returned from the altar, the words on the other side of the screen said, “Go in Peace, to love and serve the Lord”. Only in the power of the Spirit can we minister.

I tried to work out how many times I've presided at the Eucharist in the almost sixteen years I have been a priest – at hospital bedsides, in care homes, on the coffee table of a lone communicant, in the Vicarage lounge, on Sundays and midweek. Over three and a half thousand celebrations here in these parishes and yet each time is like presiding for the first time, feeling that intense sense of God's love because Eucharistic Worship is Christ's: our ministry, but part of HIS ministry.

So ministry is about being called by God and sent out in the power of the Spirit to preach the Good News, release captives and heal the sick. As St Paul points out in our second reading, it is God who matters - whatever work we do, we are partners working together with God and the one and only foundation for our work is the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks today with all my heart for mentors and colleagues, parishioners and members of the community in my home parish, in Stoke Prior, Wychbold & Upton Warren and in Astwood Bank and Bradley Green in Worcester Diocese, in the Leominster Team Ministry, especially the parishes of Ivington, Eyton, Monkland and Dilwyn, the Weobley Group, where I served my Stipendary Curacy in Hereford Diocese and also my tutors and colleagues on the West of England Ministry Training Course.

I give thanks for my incumbency here, for Maxine (God rest her soul) who welcomed me, for Stephen my friend and colleague, for Ruth and Carole my fellow ministers and dear friends. Carole's administrative skills are absolutely vital to our ministry here – every bit of paper, service sheet, events and service cards that pass through our hands has been typed and copied by her! I give thanks for Sir William as patron and all who have served as Churchwardens and PCC officers and members, for choir members, organists and all who have organised social events. Most of all, I give thanks for the patience and endurance of my family and friends. Mick has been a great support both personally and in our children's work and our children and grandchildren have brought love and laughter into our lives and have made their contributions to parish life over the years.

In all the places I have ministered, I have felt loved and valued. There are things I know we have done well here – bringing the five parishes together, refurbishing buildings, Transforming Church projects - and there have been challenging situations – seeing the lead ripped from the north and south aisles was a soul-destroying experience and conducting the funerals of four churchwardens and other beloved hard-working church members was heart-rending.

During the Vacancy do support each other, be kind to each other as the Lord is kind to you. Try to appreciate the sacrifices the Core Team are making and try not to be unduly critical: we will never get it right all the time. St Peter got into trouble, but his leadership of the church was never in doubt. My successor's vision may not be the same as mine, so be open to a possible change of direction, but remember that it is our love for God and for one another that matters more than anything else and that it is prayer that enables that love to happen.

The Lord bless you and watch over you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord look kindly on you and grant you his peace.

Amen.

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Readings:

Isaiah 6:1-8

1: In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple.

2: Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew.

3: And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'

4: The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

5: And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!'

6: Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs.

7: The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.'

8: Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'

1 Corinthians 3:3b-11

3b: For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?

4:For when one says, `I belong to Paul', and another, `I belong to Apollos', are you not merely human?

5:What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each.

6:I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

7:So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

8:The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labour of each.

9:For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

10:According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it.

11:For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

Luke 4:16-21

16:When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,

17:and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

18:`The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,

19:to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

20:And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

21:Then he began to say to them, `Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'