

LICENSED LAY MINISTRY

'If we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.' (2 Corinthians 5.13)

We meet today to worship and to reflect in a mood of celebration, and if one thing is certain it is that Christians are most truly and effectively being Christian when they celebrate.

It began of course with Jesus and the strategy of his ministry. The analogy of a wedding *celebration* was his riposte to doubters, and *celebratory* meals said it all: a strategy of inclusiveness that enabled him to interpret those meals as gestures of healing. And we today are first of all here in celebration of our having been *included* and being in the process of being *healed*. And it is as such, is it not, that on this celebratory day we review our ministry?

We are all readers, but you are licensed lay ministers, and I do like your title, especially because of the word 'minister'. It's a word to be treasured. In some circles nowadays people are very keen on the word 'leader', and they talk about 'leadership teams'. I must admit I'm not a fan of such language, for it smacks of *Führerschaft* and the instinct for control; it has too much of a top-down flavour, whereas 'minister' is arguably more appropriate for us Christians: it's more 'from the bottom up' and retains the thoroughly Christian sense of service.

As we celebrate today we are all very conscious of the history into which we have been privileged to enter. That history reminds us of how much over 150 years things have developed and changed. And, we may ask, were the reasons for the changes primarily theological? I doubt it. After all, pragmatism (not, by the way, to be despised) and cultural pressure have been powerful influences.

In the first case, the need to maintain a worshipping and witnessing presence in communities where otherwise it might fade or falter has plainly been a factor in developing the ministry of readers. That's vital.

In the second case, consider the results of Kate Adie's research for her fine book, *Fighting on the Home Front*, in which she chronicles the legacy of women in WWI. A century ago it caused many a frisson to have women working on the railways, in the shipyards, or as clerks in the Bank of England. Many assumed that once the peace had arrived the women would evanesce and go back home where they really belonged. And similarly in the church: doubtless haunted by the thought of those allegedly distasteful suffragettes, the episcopally good and supposedly great made it clear that the changes in society were things up with which the Christian community would not put, and most certainly would not copy. I quote:

The Bishop of London said he would only allow women to speak in church when there was no other place, only to women and girls and only from the aisle and in front of the chancel steps. It was all too much for the Bishop of Chelmsford who declared that he 'would not sanction any woman telling her sisters of the Saviour's love in any church in the Diocese'. (Adie 2014: 230)

But, thank God, we have come through all that, probably because changing attitudes in society drove Christians to have another look at their tradition. And, lo and behold, society had got it right, and was able to exert pressure on the Church to be itself, a non-discriminatory, celebratory body.

And ever and again, including in our own times, we find ourselves ministering/serving in a church which is not a sect, and therefore does not regard the world as a sphere of darkness waiting for us to spread the light, but a world where women and men, endowed by God with wisdom and conscience but not necessarily worshippers with us, are sometimes a bit faster to draw conclusions as to what is right than Christians are. That said, let us, women and men alike, celebrate our ministry in a church where that can happen ...even if it sometimes takes a long time!

And that brings me to what might be called my text this morning. I rather like it, and I hope you do too: 'If we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.' (2 Corinthians 5.13) It sometimes seems that, when we move from the past to the present, readers/LLMs feel a degree of unease. Maybe the incumbent gives us less opportunity for ministry than we would like; maybe we experience insecurity because others who are not trained seem to be doing the things that we might have expected to do. So what's the point and where do we fit in?

I believe the answer to the first is that we can do no better than make ourselves available: that is sufficient. And the answer to the second is partly in gladness that as many people as possible can share in the inclusive and health-giving life of the people of God, and partly to invest in our own ongoing training. We can make a contribution because we can *study* and *think* and *teach*: we are in a position to push the boat out theologically, to engage in constructive critical thinking conveyed in an unthreatening way. It is one of my deepest convictions that Christian people are not as frail as some engaged in ministry suppose, and Christian people who spend their lives thinking critically, evaluating, checking, questioning Monday-Saturday usually respond gratefully to the invitation to think critically and constructively on Sunday!

As society around us, the culture of which we are a part, stirs us to revisit issues relating to being a Christian and being a Christian community in our day, it remains true that our ministry is ultimately meant to be theological. When Paul speaks of 'being beside ourselves', he probably has in mind the exercise of charismatic gifts, and we know from other things he said that such gifts are best exercised not in public but in private – private worship: 'If we are beside ourselves, it is for God.' And when he speaks of 'being in our right mind' he is opening a window into his own ministry, a ministry of cool, careful, discriminatory judgment as to what the essential newness of the gospel is all about. It needs thinking through: hence 'we persuade (v. 11) ... we judge (v. 14) ... we know (v. 16) ... we appeal (v. 20)'. The thinking through will never be done. But is it not clear that the key consideration is to be found in those two words, 'for you'? 'If we are of a sound mind, it is *for you*.' The question of whether we're given enough work to do is not the point; the question of where we may find security for ourselves in a well-defined role is not the point. The point is that what we are doing, ministering, serving, is 'for you', for the health and healing of the people of God.

Now this morning's reading from 2 Corinthians 5 is one of the purplest of all purple Pauline passages, but it is typical in that it requires us to work. I've been trying to talk a little about ministry (one of Paul's favourite words), and I am absolutely clear that if his Christ is one who took the form of a servant, each and every minister of Christ is required to take the form of a student.

Three days ago there took place in Durham Cathedral the funeral of Bishop David Jenkins. I like very much not only his mantra that 'even the Church can't keep a good God down!' but also his definition of what he was about: 'a ministry of openness and exploration'. We might also attend to what he encountered when engaged in this ministry.

I would gradually learn [he wrote] that – in contrast to my expectation – the majority of Christians did not experience faith as embracing the risk of belief in the community of the pilgrim people whom God is guiding through the wilderness of this world towards the future of his eternal love. For many believers the appeal of faith in God is as a citadel guarded by ecclesiastical dogma resting on assumed scriptural ‘facts’.

Let’s hold on to that phrase: ‘ministry’, that’s us; ‘openness’, that’s a preparedness to assess old things and embrace new insights, insights that the society we live in may have achieved before we have done; ‘exploration’, that’s living in a world of never-ending study, in which we set ourselves to be, in the fullest sense of the term, ‘in our right mind’.

Way back in the middle of the last century a parish priest in central London wrote a book for people for whom Christianity was coming alive for the first time. He called the book *Henceforth*. It was an excellent guide, for which I was personally grateful. And of course it took off from another saying in 2 Corinthians 5: ‘He died for all, that those who live might *henceforth* live no longer for themselves but for him who died and was raised for them.’ Things were intended never to be the same again once people had become involved in a death which was *for them*, i.e. a death in which *they share*, rather than one which was his rather than theirs, and a resurrection which was *for them*, i.e. a resurrection in which *they share* rather than viewing it as something that happened to him alone. And the new world that was opened up ‘*henceforth*’ and which could be grasped and conveyed by those who were ‘of a sound mind’ was a ‘new creation’, one in which the polarities and antitheses that characterize the world as we know it have no place within the community of the resurrection, i.e. the Easter people, the body of the corporate and risen Christ. This is not atonement thinking, still less substitutionary atonement thinking: Paul does not say ‘he died instead of all so that all might not die; he says ‘he died for all, that is to say, all have died’. This is identification-cum-participation thinking. Death, the last enemy of us all, is allowed to be a bald and even tragic fact. It is the sheer fact, the *brutum factum*, of Christ’s death that is crucial for his identification with us, and thus for our identification with him in his resurrection.

If only the people of God could grasp the full implications of what it means to be the resurrection people of God, so much ill could be avoided and so much healing and health could be achieved. We have work to do to grasp it and be grasped by it. This must surely be the agenda for our continuing commitment in ministry: ‘If we are of a sound mind, it is *for you*.’