

Sermon for 30th Anniversary of Ordination of Women to Priesthood

Salisbury Cathedral: 15th June 2024

Isaiah 61: 1-3a

Psalm 145:1-7,21

2 Corinthians 5: 14-19

John 20: 19-23

This is a joyful event. Actually, standing here – and thank you very much to Bishop Stephen and Dean Nick for the privilege of returning to this pulpit – standing here reminds me that the beloved Mark Bonney one-time Canon Treasurer of this Cathedral used to tell me off for describing services of worship as ‘events’.

This is a joyful service. It’s such a great delight to commemorate the first ordinations of women as priests in this diocese on St Barnabas’ Day, 11th June, in 1994. Between March and July of that year 1,500 women deacons were ordained as priests in the Cathedrals from Bristol to Truro. What a reason to celebrate: for those who were there, and for all who’ve rejoiced in our Church recognising the spiritual authority and gifts of women. Not before time you might say.

Behind me in this Cathedral there’s the tomb of John Wordsworth, the Bishop of Salisbury after whom the Grammar School is named – Bishop Wordsworth. John came from a distinguished family of clerics. His father and brothers were all ordained, but not his extraordinary sister Elizabeth who instead had to content herself with founding two Oxford colleges and dedicating her talents to the education of women. I’ve often wondered, did

anyone ever ask Elizabeth whether she had a vocation to the priesthood?
Or if not, did they wonder why the question seemed inappropriate?

Like all anniversaries, when it comes to commemorating and celebrating, we discover many layers of reality to be navigated. There are memories to be cherished, experiences which might contradict each other, regrets to be endured, mistakes which are still burdensome such as the Act of Synod, history to be interpreted, issues that are unresolved and tasks unfinished. But today is largely a day for paying tribute.

Tribute to the women ordained in 1994 who had already, as deaconesses and deacons, had to put up with a lot of unworthy and neurotic behaviour on behalf of the Church – those pioneers all have their stories and it's worth listening to them if only to record and honour the tenacity it took to weather the Church's failings.

Let's pay that tribute by celebrating three things which are absolutely clear about what happened in this Cathedral Church this week in 1994.

- Firstly, social history was changed when women were ordained in the Church of England. This shift wasn't just about church protocols. The country felt proud of us, and it mattered, including to those who never darkened the door of their local Church. I know this because I regularly hear people describe how, at school or in their workplace, they listened to the debate broadcast live by the BBC from the General Synod in November 1992 when the decision was made. It was a national occasion in a way that nothing the Church has done in the past 30 years has equalled. And those listening knew that in choosing to allow women into the priesthood of the Church our society had become a little more just. All but a tiny minority thought

that was cause for great celebration because it advanced the equity sought by all women, and it improved the lives of all men.

- What's also clear is that the contribution of ordained women to this Diocese of Salisbury in those 30 years has been immeasurable. It's been a diocese that has produced its own women ministers, educated, trained and formed them into the priests it needs to do the work of ministry in parishes, hospitals, schools and prisons. It's also nurtured the gifts of people like myself and Bishop Karen, Archdeacons Ruth, Sue and Penny, Precentor Anna, the list is long of those who arrived here, and have this diocese to thank for not only accepting the ministry of women but leading the way in normalising the presence and contributions of able women. And as a result Salisbury also played its part in exporting confident and talented women to other parts of the Church, not least to become Bishop of London.

Debates and disagreements have happened here in those 30 years, just as they've happened across the whole of the national Church. Ordained women have been patronised, abused, stalked and harassed; but on the whole Salisbury has been a safe place for them. Which also leads me to pay tribute to those of you, Bishops, Archdeacons, Diocesan officers, Cathedral staff and volunteers, members of ordinary parishes of Wiltshire and Dorset, for each and every one of you has contributed to this 'normalisation' of women's leadership. Together we've travelled from the era when women were trying as hard as they could to do things just like male priests in order

to convince those who were nervous about this change that we weren't going to damage the priesthood they valued: whilst at the same time those same women were dealing with the expectations that women priests might bring something fresh, so redemptive that it might save the Church. In all of that turmoil you, the Diocese of Salisbury let women be themselves, gloriously and vulnerably themselves with all our frailties and mistakes, and for that I will always give thanks to God.

- Thirdly and possibly most significantly, we celebrate today the essence of priesthood because in those 30 years women have been simply going about the business of exercising Christ's ministry. If a priest is an icon of Christ, it's surely not an icon of his manliness or gender, but of Christ's self-sacrificing work in bringing what is human experience into that daily and transforming connection with what is divine.

In this service we've enjoyed again the readings from that first ordination. Readings which were chosen for precisely that purpose – to illustrate the nature of what it is to be ordained.

- ❖ Isaiah wrote beautifully about how those who are God's agents are anointed to bring good news, to heal the broken, to challenge oppression, to proclaim freedom, to comfort those who are grief-stricken, to build up those faint of heart and mournful of spirit. As we give thanks today for priests – female and male – who've been true to that calling I invite those of you

who are women priests to allow yourself to recognise how you have been fulfilling Isaiah's mandate of liberation for all people. In so many ways you've been God's agents of freedom and healing. You've built up those of a faint heart and comforted those mournful of spirit. We love you for it.

- ❖ Then the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians spoke of the importance of the ministry of reconciliation, of how the Church has the responsibility for making things new, as Christ defeated hatred and death and so was raised from the dead. We are resurrection people invested in love and hope, and in God's power to reconcile us to himself so that our trespasses, be they many and be they hurtful, don't define us. He entrusts that message of reconciliation to us and priests live by it.

Thank God for the priests – female and male – who in our experience of the last 30 years have been reconcilers: reconciling people to God, to one another, dealing with conflicts in our communities, but perhaps most of all reconciling people to themselves and helping them to find meaning in potentially life-destroying events.

- ❖ Thirdly in a priest's duty St John reminds the people of God that Jesus breathes on them, having shown them the marks of violence on his hands and feet, so that they might be the visible expression of Jesus in a world which badly needs peace and forgiveness. It's what we have come to call 'mission' – being

sent with forgiveness as the heart of God's authority. It's a priestly work to free people from their shame and guilt.

We give thanks for all those priests we have known who have pursued their ordination calling:

- To bring good news;
- To reconcile and make things new in people's lives;
- To encourage the Church to go out, to reach all places with the life of Jesus and the power of God's love.

And we celebrate all that women will go on bringing to that task of priestly ministry. The way they bring their life experience, of daughterhood, womanhood, motherhood: for the priesthood is better for embracing such into its leadership and ministry. The way they express their vocation by their passion and skills, and the callings the Church discerns.

Anniversaries are for proper celebration. Yet they also leave us with an awareness of unfinished business. When you mark a 40th wedding anniversary you don't think that is it, you press on for what the next ten or twenty years holds in store. Lamps yet unlit, tasks not even begun.

So our celebration today isn't an end in itself. There's much to do. Women need to feel safe. The Church needs to acknowledge and address misogyny, not least its own blind spots and prejudices. The priesthood needs to work at better fulfilling its mission, of living true to its calling. But 30 years is a good start.

May Salisbury, with the fantastic help of its women clergy, go on being a beacon of that calling – of making Jesus known.

