

2017-06-18 Trinity 1 HC Readers Service at Cathedral 1

First Sunday after Trinity - Sunday 18th June 2017 Readers' Licensing Service – Cathedral 3.30pm

Sermon given by Rev'd Alan Forsdike SSM Parish Priest, The United Benefice of Westerfield and Tuddenham St Martin with Witnessham, Staff Menton to the Lay Ministry Training Course (LMTC).

Romans 5:1-8

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Matthew 9:35-10:8

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.'

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

SERMON

Congratulations, you made it! I imagine our about-to-be-licensed Readers are pinching themselves because they're actually here - and looking back over their discernment and training the last three or four years seem both a long time ago yet have gone in a flash.

What a splendid occasion this is and I'm so pleased to be a part of it because I've been privileged to have had a part in your training. In fact, looking around, that's 2017-06-18 Trinity 1 HC Readers Service at Cathedral 2

been my privilege for many of you because I've been supporting Readers-in-training since 2009.

It's now about 17 years since I reluctantly answered God's call to ministry and I can hardly believe what God has done with me: what's he's given me to do; the challenges he's helped me face; the situations he's put me in – and the places he has sent me (including up these hallowed steps!)

I often say to students that I'm living proof that there is life after a ministry training course because I've been through it myself! It's robust, it's thorough and it is life changing... I don't say that lightly ... it does change your life - and for the good too.

In Isaiah chapter 43 we read that God says, "I have called you by name, you are mine." That's both thrilling and scary at one and the same time as I'm sure you know.

To feel God calling us to any kind of ministry is not easy – it's a step into the unknown – it moves us out of our comfort zone – it's a giving up... and a taking on – and we all feel unworthy of the call because of our own fragility and foibles – but, God knows best.

Many of us had other roles in our own churches before we answered God's call. We served God and his church as ministers in a myriad of different ways. We witnessed to our faith in our daily lives often quietly and unseen.

The difference now is that we are public ministers – (whether or not we wear the drastic-plastic).

Our names and mug-shots may appear on church noticeboards or parish magazines – we appear up-the-front in church on Sundays - at community events – at funerals and so on. We are highly visible in our ministry.

In his Maundy Thursday sermon, Bishop Mike said this, *"I want ministers to show me something of God; of God's way with us, God's goodness, God's beauty, God's love. This is a calling for all Christians but it is peculiarly the calling of the public minister, because you are set apart, to be visible, visible like I am now. It doesn't mean you're any better than*

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Christians. You're not promising to be perfect. But you are consenting to be visible, to let other people watch you while you struggle wholeheartedly with them to genuinely, authentically and truly follow Jesus."

Bishop Mike was so right – that is what it means to be a public minister. Set apart, visible, exposed, responsible.

Last Sunday the lectionary reading for the Gospel was 'The Great Commission'. To paraphrase: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*" I'm no Greek scholar but I've recently found out that, in that language, the imperative "to go" is more likely to be "when you go" – an unquestioning assumption that you will go.

But let's not forget that Jesus didn't just send them out to get on with it themselves; he reassured his disciples that he'd be there beside them – for all time.

They were a mixed bunch just like us but that didn't stop him choosing them.

They needed to be cajoled, to be nurtured, to be corrected and to be formed into ministers just as do we. And that formation and training doesn't stop at licensing or ordination – it's life-long.

Today, in the Gospel reading we just heard, Jesus is once again issuing a commission and a command to his disciples.

Chronologically, this comes before the Great Commission and we hear he is sending them out to '*the lost of Israel*'.

In Matthew 28 his commission is to ALL nations (not just the Jews); but the point is the same, and encouragement that they will get out there and do this work he's begun.

There's a lot of it to do for, as today's Gospel reminds us, '*The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few*' – and that's why he's called all of you and me. 2017-06-18 Trinity 1 HC Readers Service at Cathedral 4

Sadly, no longer can we assume that people around us have had the basics of Christianity: they are *'the sheep without a shepherd'*. As Bishop Martin says in this week's vlog, we live in a world "*where our language about God and people's perception of the nature of church the reality of God, the meaning of God is alien to many in our culture... we are in a different situation than we were even a generation ago.*"

It's my experience that many have a vague recollection of Bible stories from primary school taught as story and not necessarily as faith. But work with our parishioners at baptism or marriage preparation or at a funeral visit and you soon start to see that those seeds of faith sown at an early age have the potential, years later, to germinate; to grow. We have young Mums and Dads who'll bring their children to Messy Church – the children are sometimes too young to understand but it's surprising how open the adults can be. The harvest is indeed plentiful and we are the labourers who water those seeds so God can give the growth.

And what do we get in return? ... Should we expect anything in return? In today's Gospel, Jesus says, "*You received without payment; give without payment.*"

Is giving up our time and energy for God paying him back then?

I don't think so: we can never adequately do that. A familiar song has the words, *'Freely, freely you have received; freely give. Go in my name and because you believe, others will know that I live.'* As today's Epistle reminds us, *'God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.'* – love given freely and unconditionally to those who would accept it.

God's grace is indeed freely and generously given. As Luke puts it, *'Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap.'*

Our response therefore is also to freely give. 2017-06-18 Trinity 1 HC Readers Service at Cathedral 5

There's no way we can repay that gift. But what we can do is unpack the gift he has given us (and for us as ministers it's our training and formation as God's ministers) and offer that back to God, and the people he sends us to serve.

What we hear in the gospel readings this and last week is not Jesus talking about what you should go out and say, but what you should go out and do. Again, quoting from the Bishops' vlog, "*there is no shortage of opportunity for us as express the love of Christ, to show that love, to proclaim that kingdom, through practical expression.*"

Bishop Martin made the important point that, when people tell us that our words make sense, they don't tell us that our care, our love, our help doesn't make sense. And Bishop Mike added that people don't necessarily remember what you say but they do remember how you make them feel.

No matter how small we think our offering is – no matter how inadequate we feel – no matter how weak and wounded we might be in ourselves, if we trust that what we have is from God, he takes what little we give and makes it bigger ... and that brings us greater, unexpected rewards.

You don't have to be perfect: the best ministers aren't anything like perfect, they can be slightly unusual, a little off-the-wall. But the best ministers are those who, in the midst of the muddle and complexity of life, make it easier to believe, through their prayerful persistence, their largeness of heart, through their self-less giving that lets God be seen. You who are being licensed to this role today are not taking on a leisure activity (something you bolt on to what you already do or something you bring out on Sundays).

No, you are being licensed to this role because this is a way of life that needs sticking at. Your emotions may be as fickle as most people; your mind may be just as muddled and you may feel inadequate or in a mess. But the Church sees something special in you and compels you to make vows to promise you will be dedicated. 2017-06-18 Trinity 1 HC Readers

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That dedication isn't ever-changing whims; it's not to emotional flights of fancy and certainly not to trendy thinking. But the church asks you to be dedicated to God's story: dedicated to making God visible to the people of God and the world.

I'll end by quoting those wonderful words of encouragement and power given to us in today's reading:

'Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.'

No-one ever said it would be easy; but it is worthwhile and it is a privilege.

May God bless each one of us as we seek our part in his mission.

Amen.