

ST. ASAPH ORDINATION SERMON 2019

Yn enw'r Tad, a'r Mab, a'r Ysbryd Glân. Amen

A vocation is a primarily a gift. It's a gift given by God to the individual receiving it, but it's also a gift given to the faith community to whom that person is sent, and to the wider church and to society, even though society in general wouldn't know a priestly vocation from a bar of soap. Today we're rejoicing in God's very generous and lavish gift to this diocese and this part of the world of twelve people (I wonder where we've seen that number before?) who have responded to the call to leave their nets and follow as disciples of Jesus in the priesthood and the diaconate.

Individual people respond in their own distinctive ways to a vocation. In the time that I've spent in retreat with today's ordinands I've been particularly impressed by their dedication, their generosity, their honesty and their humility. These are not people who think they're God's gift to the diocese, except, of course, that's exactly what they are. Each of us is God's gift to the world. Each of us has received a lifelong vocation to be ourselves through the primordial call of our baptism, which is an invitation by God to discover what that gift of being ourselves consists of. In baptism each of us is called to share in the life of Jesus as prophet, priest and king. Most of you getting up this morning and looking in the mirror probably didn't think, 'I'm feeling particularly royal today – I must exercise my gift of prophecy and give my priesthood of all believers a bit of an airing'. Life isn't like that, and to ourselves our lives seem fairly humdrum. Yet every one of us baptised into the community of the crucified and risen Christ exercises our prophetic vocation whenever our words and deeds demonstrate to others that God is with us, in the everyday reality surrounding us. The word priest in Latin is *pontifex*, which means bridge builder. We exercise our priestly vocation when we build bridges where people and communities are divided and alienated from themselves and one another. When we help one another to discover the sacredness which lies hidden in all human interactions and within all creation, when we affirm the grace of one another's lives, we are living the priestly aspect of our baptismal vocation. And when we proclaim our faith that, despite all of life's

difficulties and struggles, the world is God's, and God is good, we're living out our kingly or kingdom vocation. So much for most of us in the cathedral today. But we've gathered to thank God for the gift to our communities of these twelve particular priestly vocations and the vocations of two people called to the immensely crucial ministry of care for children and young people.

The Bible shows us that having a sense of being called by God is not always good news. We've only to look at the patriarchs and prophets. Abraham and Sarah say, 'You must be joking – at our age??' Jeremiah says, 'I'm far too young – call me back later'. Isaiah feels he isn't worthy, Jacob ends up in a wrestling match and Moses says, 'Ask my brother – he's much better at this kind of thing than me'. The New Testament isn't much better. Zechariah asks too many questions and is struck dumb, Mary tries to give God a biology lesson, Joseph is unappreciative when God takes a hand in his marriage plans and opts for a quickie divorce. Peter tells Jesus to leave him alone, Nathanael thinks Jesus is a yokel from a one-horse town, Paul has to be dragged off his horse before he's persuaded.

I didn't hear the individual vocation stories of all today's ordinands, but their presence here didn't come about in an instant. Each one has had to undertake a journey, no doubt with times of doubt and struggle and anxiety as well as of faith, hope and love. Jesus has strange taste in friends. You've only got to look round at your neighbours in this cathedral to see that. But he knows what is in the heart of each one of us. He has looked into the heart of each of our ordinands and has found enough there to say to them, 'Come, follow me', and they have followed. That is a sign of amazing grace. A sister in my community had lived a rather racy life, so when she told her mother she was going to a convent to try her vocation, her mother's response was, 'But I thought they wanted good people in convents – not people like you!' As far as we can tell, when God calls someone it isn't about being in the top ten percent of the world's cleverest or holiest or most talented, though our ordinands are clearly the exception to that rule... God looks at the deepest desires of our hearts and works with what He finds there. In the C14th an anonymous priest wrote a book called *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In its final chapter, it says, 'It is not what you are, nor what you have been, but what

you want to be that God sees, with merciful eyes'. A call to discipleship is above all a call to be a person of deep desire: desire for encounter with God, desire to serve God's people in love.

Today's feast of Sts. Peter and Paul tells us something crucial about how the church down the ages has reflected on discipleship and vocation. The one thing we can safely say is that neither saint was an obvious spiritual hero. The Gospels and Epistles and Acts of the Apostles give us awarts and all portrait of these two pillars of the early church. Peter was big on boasting, small on performance. One minute he was the Rock, the next minute he was Satan. If Scripture scholars are right that the stories about him came from Peter himself and those who knew him best, there seems to have been a perverse delight in showing him in an unflattering light. Paul isn't much better. His own letters show him to have been everyone's nightmare colleague. He quarrelled with every one of his companions, and is the only person I know of who quite literally bored someone to death.

Yet the story of these two wounded, vulnerable and fragile men who became the bedrock of the church is inspired by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God. It seems that the Spirit wants to remind us of the transforming strength that is God's gift within every vocation. That is what our ordinands need to rely on. Today's reading from Zechariah sums it up, 'Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts'. They won't become good ministers of the Gospel by winning some divine X Factor, but by responding to the grace of each moment of life, both positive and negative. Zechariah also speaks of those who despise the day of small things. But every day of our lives is a day of small things, potentially transfigured by God's grace.

Here I want to say something special to the young people in the congregation. Each of you has a vocation too – a vocation to become the best possible version of yourself, made that way by God. You will discover what that is by getting to know the God of small things, and it will transform your life, so be alert to that. I also want to say something to the wider congregation. Peter and Paul didn't become great disciples in a vacuum. They did it through the love and support of their communities. We're going to hear professions of commitment to God's service from our ordinands.

It's important that in our hearts all of us here, family, friends and faith communities, also make a commitment to them, to do all in our power to support them in their ministry. We get the clergy we deserve – there's a thought... If they are God's gift to the diocese, then it's our job to appreciate the gift and care for it properly. Then the gift will come to fruition. Glory be to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we could ask or imagine. Glory be to him in the church and in Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen.