

30th Anniversary of the Ordination of Women as Priests
St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne
Tuesday 13 December 2022

Numbers 26:33, 27:7-11

1 Peter 4:10-11

Psalms 121

John 20:1-20

When the first women priests were ordained here in December 1992, they hadn't just landed from Mars, and popped into St Paul's Cathedral, calling out "Here we are!" Anything but!

Among the women ordained here were priests who'd been deaconesses for a long, long time; priests like Elizabeth Alfred. She was first in alphabetical order, and although already retired it had been agreed for some years, she would be ordained when it was possible. The first of the candidates at the first of the three ordination services which took place in this Cathedral in December of 1992, Elizabeth had been serving the church as a deaconess for many decades, being ordained deacon in 1986.

In 1986 a few younger deaconesses were with those older, pioneering ones. I happened to be one of them. I had felt that deaconess was a form of public recognition of an authorised ministry, biblical in origin. In the early 1980's as the debates over the inclusion of women as Deacons and Priests kept going, it was important for me to be able to stand alongside my male peers. I had personally experienced the ministry of deaconesses and had, some years earlier, at the age of 16, made enquiry about ministry to Deaconess House.

But in 1992 there were other women ordained priests, women who had not been deaconesses. Rather, before being ordained as deacons, women like Barbara Darling and Heather Marten had chosen to be 'Trained Women Workers'. Trained Women Workers chose that title as a way of cutting through some of the comfortable, familiar and old images of women in ministry that didn't seem able to be challenged or questioned. Those who chose the path of Trained Woman Workers stepped into ministry in a new role that was shaking up people's expectations of what women could do, offering a picture different from that of the Deaconess, and witnessing the strong expectation of the late 1970s that ordination as deacons and priests was just around the corner!

Then there were priests who, from the beginning of their ordained ministries, had been ordained deacons alongside their male peers. Kate Prowd was the first of these in 1986, but many more followed.

The ordinations in 1992 were a mix of all those strands of women's pathways coming together - deaconesses, Trained Women Workers, and the many women ordained as deacons since 1986.

In December 1992 the ordinations of these women had to be celebrated in three separate services; the 13th of December, 16th December, and the 21st December. Thirty-Three women were ordained in this Cathedral over those seven days, and each service drew a huge congregation, and for some Melbourne Anglicans Advent 1992 was a celebration of years of waiting and watching as people danced from one ordination to another, one First Eucharist to another, across the Diocese.

It was a heady time for everyone who had been part of the studying of scripture, of looking at scripture and the church's history through a new hermeneutical lens.

There was the debating, the arguing, the anguish of what the church would become. Some of the opposition was tough. Some was revoltingly personal. Some women were labelled as dangerous. And some was simply the response of people for whom reframing their understanding of God, of God's Church and of the place and role of women as it had been taught, received and assumed, was a whole new journey.

These stories were often about women setting out at the stirring of the Holy Spirit, like Mary in the garden heading into the unknown 'while it was still dark' and meeting their new future there.

For 33 women who stood in this Cathedral 30 years ago, and those who prayed and worked to see the day on which an ordaining bishop would lay hands on women praying, "send down your Holy Spirit upon your servant ... whom we set apart by the laying on of our hands for the office and work of a priest in your Church", this anniversary and the future it ushered in three decades ago has the weight of the years which led up to it and the grace of the years since and more than 900 women have now been ordained priest across much of the Anglican Church of Australia.

Tonight, we celebrate both the anniversary and the journey, the witness of these past 30 years. The already and the not yet.

As we read of Mary and Jesus in the Easter Garden, a story which began in darkness and ended in the full light of Easter morning, the full light of Mary's sending to tell of his resurrection life, and reflect on the past 30 years of our life together, we should be asking where is it we hear the women speaking dangerous truth to the church today? We know there are not as many young women sitting in Cathedrals or in our churches, hearing of women's calling to Christian leadership, especially as deacons or priests or bishops.

This is partly due to the resurgence of what is sometimes called "complementarian" teaching that affirms women's ministry in general but brackets women out from senior leadership roles. Another teaching strand continues in parts of the Anglican church that requires women to willingly accept submission to men, for women to be "biblically" faithful. And for some it's been too easy for this seemingly comfortable theology to gain traction, offering willing submission to the idea of an all-male leadership as somehow reflecting the God who chose a woman to be the first apostle and sent her to speak his resurrection life.

I have been wondering then, is it a quiet possibility that women's ordained leadership, for which we worked and fought and prayed for so long, might only be here for a season? Even though there are thousands of women across the Anglican Communion who are deacons and priests, and at least 97 women who are bishops who met at Lambeth earlier this year?

It is unthinkable, and yet perhaps not, that women could once again be written out of the leadership of Christ's Church?

How is the Holy Spirit at work in this? Who in the church, and in the world outside these walls, is now hearing the voice of our risen Lord speaking their name, and sending them forth?

I have recently heard a lot about what people call the 'pub test' and how we Anglicans might be failing it. Certainly, we know of the recent deluge of bad news stories about the church and can think of people who experience themselves as 'on the edge' of our institutional life. Because of their gender, sexual identity, or life experience, our church has been a place where the trust and belonging they looked for has not been their experience.

There can be no doubt for any of us who follow the risen Lord Jesus that resurrection is uncomfortable. Resurrection is walking into new and uncharted territory. For those who ushered in the ordination of women this meant allowing the Holy Spirit to lead in ways that haven't been universally popular, yet have been received, discerned and lived out, faithfully reflecting the call of God to the Church, witnessing to new life in Christ. Living into the future, the only possible trajectory for us.

This anniversary reminds us that the Biblical story, in both the Old and New Testaments are unfeignedly about God choosing the unexpected ones to be leaders. God giving the unexpected ones a purpose and a role.

A year or so ago, I was in a school with year 11 students doing the ATAR religion subject. I was talking about my story. The Principal who had joined the class commented, "It seems to me as though everything you have done has led you to where you are now. This is God's purpose for you."

I was shocked. This language is easy to use for other people, but not always for myself. I don't always feel that way. I often feel I'm doing the best I can, sometimes perhaps getting it wrong; sometimes standing out; praying for grace, the certainty of "purpose" isn't the language I use for myself. Nor, as I reflect is it language that I hear other women leaders, lay and ordained, use for themselves, speak with certainty. Yet, this purpose in one we want to model for younger women.

It's very powerful language. And all women can be renewed in the strength of our sense of living out God's purpose for us. For Mary, in the resurrection garden, there is an absolute purpose. It's an apostolic sending. What the Risen Lord does with her, and with us.

We are at the centre of God's purpose, and purposeful.

If you're not ordained, maybe this is God's purpose for you as well? Are you a woman who might hear her name spoken by the risen Lord, and be sent in this way?

The apostolic sending of women didn't end with Mary Magdalene. It won't end with the generation that we are remember today.

To the early-ordained women, the ones who have been exploring your purpose for these many years; Stay connected to each other. Keep learning alongside each other. Work with each other. No matter what's been said, we are none of us, mean girls. Be collaborative and consultative and generous with each other.

To the more recently ordained women, the ones who are perhaps just learning how to fully take up the authority you have been given: Take the stories that are told. There are stories that can inform you but mustn't capture you. We matriarchs don't know everything! You are serving in a different world, stepping into a different future, from the one we moved into 30 years ago. So, you will have to do things differently. Don't be captured by what it was like, but always remember that it's not too many steps back to being held, comfortably or uncomfortably, in old models of ministry.

To the many men who have been part of this story: I always remember that it was men as well as women who encouraged me. It must be. We are the church together. There are men who still haven't quite heard how to hear God speak in a different voice.

Thank God for the many, many, men celebrating that there are new players in the leadership stakes. Mary Magdalene and Peter were both in that garden and they each had an experience of Christ. In this moment we know that reframing ministry is vital. Our mission field is changing before our eyes and will continue to change.

Christendom is dead. There are new ways of being church, of living with the bible, sacraments, the prayer and liturgy which shape a deep and abiding spirituality, some of which are completely unfamiliar and experimental. But be alert (a good Advent theme!) because there's a paternalism in our culture that is still thriving. It will not serve any of us well, either women or men.

Let me end with the words we heard earlier from 1 Peter 4. There is a little irony in this. Recent commentators trace 1 Peter back to the apostle Peter. In some of the New Testament apocrypha there are stories of rivalry between Peter and Mary Magdalene. They may have jostled a bit for the title of "apostle of the resurrection". But apostolic ministry is not a competitive sport. We can read Peter's words, with Mary Magdalene and countless women since, to encourage each and every member of the church: "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ".