

Service of Celebration for the 30th Anniversary of the Ordination of Women as Priests

Holy Trinity Headington Quarry - 9th June 2024

I am very grateful to Reverend Laura and Reverend Emily for inviting me to preach at this wonderful celebration for the 30th anniversary of the ordination of women as priests in the Church of England. I am also grateful to my dear friend Anne Cowan, who first mooted the idea that I might sometime be able to come to Holy Trinity.

This year we are not only celebrating 30 years of having women priests in the Church of England, but also ten years of having women as bishops. In the Episcopal Church in the States, they are celebrating 50 years of women's ordination and this year also marks the 80th anniversary of Florence Li Tim-Oi, the first woman to be ordained priest in the Anglican Church.

Towards the end of the Second World War, the then Bishop of Hong Kong, an Englishman named R O Hall, ordained Tim-Oi on 25th January 1944. (His son, Canon Christopher Hall, lives just up the road, in Deddington!) The reaction by other Anglican bishops to Bishop Hall ordaining a woman was, sadly, incredibly negative. They called for his resignation, and he would have resigned, but Tim-Oi persuaded him that because of some of the really important things he was doing in Hong Kong, he must not resign. Instead, she offered to resign her licence but *not* her Holy Orders. She was then sent to a parish on the border of Vietnam, where she started a maternity hospital, teaching mothers-to-be and their families about the sanctity of **all** life: at that time bowls of ash were kept next to women giving birth, and if the baby was a girl, she could be smothered. There is, of course, much more that could be said about Tim-Oi's amazing life and ministry, but just one short story.

In 1984, 40 years after Tim-Oi had been ordained, she was invited to a service in her honour in Westminster Abbey. While she was in England, she was invited to tea in Lambeth Palace by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie. He believed that women *could* be priests based on his theological reasoning, but he cared more about unity and so was unhappy

about disrupting the *status quo*. After meeting with Tim-Oi, Robert Runcie said to a friend

‘Who am I to say whom God can or cannot call?’

Indeed, who can say who God calls?! But the reality is that those in positions of power in the church had the power to recognise and confirm who had and who had not been called by God. The Church of England did not decide officially until 11th November 1992 that women could be called by God to be priests. Two years after the vote, between March and August of 1994, all of the nearly **1,500 women deacons who had been waiting** were ordained as priests.

Of course, women have always served in the Church, and there is evidence that in the early Church they served as priests and bishops, but why did it take the Church of England so long to ordain women as priests, especially after the ordination of Li Tim-Oi **50 years earlier**, and the ordinations of other Anglican women that began to take place elsewhere in the Communion from the **early 1970s**? And, after we ordained women as priests, why did it take the Church of England **another 20 years** before women were able to be appointed as bishops?

In fact, ever since a brilliant lay preacher called Maude Royden was refused a pulpit in 1919, people in the Church of England started debating the idea of ordaining women. The Lambeth Conference, where all Anglican bishops meet every ten years, voted against women’s ordination in 1920 and 1930. In 1935, an Archbishop’s Commission decided to look at the issue and produce some theological reasoning. The report decided against ordaining women and the deep theological(!) issue that it did not believe that ‘the average male member of a congregation could be present at a service at which a woman presided without becoming unduly conscious of her sex!’ So much for deep theological reasoning!

It’s clear from our Gospel reading that even Jesus’s closest male disciples seem to have **forgotten in a very short space of time how Jesus treated women, how he interacted with them**. He never ignored women or trivialised their concerns, he never pampered, flattered, patronised or infantilised them. He treated women the way he treated men: with compassion, tenderness, love, honesty and sometimes he challenged them

– think of the Syrophenician woman, Martha, even his own mother. When the women who returned from the garden tomb with the astounding news that the tomb was empty and Jesus was alive, the disciples' response was dismissive and insulting: 'but these words seemed to them *an idle tale*'.

A few days ago, I went to Lambeth Place Library for the opening of an exhibition about Women and the Church of England, marking the 30th anniversary of ordaining women as priests. Parts of it were fascinating – such as the letter that Bishop Hall had written to the Archbishop of Canterbury telling him that he had ordained a woman!

Parts of it I found somewhat painful – seeing again the leaflets produced by a group calling themselves 'Women Against the Ordination of Women, remembering what they had been like and remembering some of the things the opponents said about women - and not just about women who felt called to be ordained. Also, seeing the timeline, with the vote in 1992 saying yes to women priests and then, the introduction of the Act of Synod a year later, which for the first time in the Church's history created a separate strand of episcopacy for those who were opposed, a legacy we are still living with.

Things have changed but some of the underlying issues have not. The ideology of patriarchy is still in the air that we breath, both inside and outside of the Church. Many men, and even some women, in the Church still take an androcentric view of life, and a particular kind of androcentric view, at that. There still is sexism, racism and classism, divisions that St Paul said do not exist for those who have been baptised into Christ. We need to understand the world view that Paul and other Jews had at that time. They believed in a tiered universe, with heaven above, the earth beneath, and Gehenna below. Paul believed that Christ was above men in authority and that men were above their wives. At times Paul resorted to appealing to nature, not the revelation of Christ. In 1 Corinthians chapter 11, he wrote that it was degrading for a man to have long hair and that it was degrading for a woman to cut her hair. He also warned women to wear veils, 'for the sake of the angels', because there was a belief that angels were male and could be tempted to come to earth and seduce women if they saw a

woman's hair! At times Paul was sublime, transcendent but at times, he fell back into his traditional teaching and understanding.

So, today we celebrate, knowing there is still work to do, the work of showing people who we are all called to be in Christ, showing and telling the Good News of liberation, freedom, mutuality. I wonder what Jesus would do if he could advise us on the best next steps for the Church in its message to those who still avoid or deny the legitimacy of women's ordained ministry and who treat women as if their lives and ministries matter less than men's.

Yes, more work to do but today, we **celebrate**. There is so much to celebrate. So much has changed and so many lives have been changed by the women who were ordained 30 years ago. We **celebrate** the road we have travelled and the fellow pilgrims we have met along the road, including those, like some Anglicans in other parts of the world and many of our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers, who have wanted to travel in the same direction, but who, as of yet, cannot.

We also **celebrate** those who are no longer with us, ordained and lay, who worked to help the church become and reflect more truly the Body of Christ on earth. I think of some of the women who were ordained 30 years ago who would have loved to have been here today. We give thanks for them all.

I would like you to take this opportunity to **celebrate** anew who *you* are, and your unique gifts in Christ. It is important to have ordained women, and I would like to see greater equality and mutuality in how our Church treats and deploys ordained women, but we know that it is **all** of us together who make up the body of Christ. I pray that each of you have discovered, or will discover, what it is that *you* have been called **to do and to be** as a precious and beloved child of God here on earth. As Saint Catherine of Siena said, over 600 years ago,

**Be who you were created to be
and you will set the world on fire!**

Christina Rees
9th June 2024