

30th Anniversary Ordination of Women
St Saviour's Cathedral Goulburn 5 Nov 2022
Sermon given by Bishop Genieve Blackwell
Isaiah 6:1-8, Psalm 84, 1 Timothy 4:1-16 and John 20:1-20

Thank you for the invitation to preach this afternoon, to be part of this service marking the 30th anniversary of the first women ordained as priests in this Diocese. On the eve of the feast of St Thomas – another very unexpected leader in the church. It's a great honour for me especially as I have had the privilege of being a colleague of many of you here as priest, Archdeacon and bishop. I have both looked up to you and learnt much.

The three readings chosen for today are very rich And each have something to say to us on this occasion. I want to begin with our epistle from 1 John 4. I think many of us here will look back over 30 years - or more or less - of ordained ministry and realise the truth of St Paul's words to St Timothy. The challenge of ministry. The demands of ministry. What it is to be a good servant of Christ Jesus as we are nourished on the words of the faith and follow sound teaching and as we do our own inner work.

The importance of training in godliness, setting an example in what you say and what you do. The toil and struggle of ministry – whether that is the work of prayer, pastoral care or teaching. Basically not losing sight of what is most important: Giving attention to reading, to exhortation and teaching. (v 13) Not neglecting the gift that is in you. (v 14) Paying attention to yourself and your teaching. (v 16) And I trust as you look back on thirty years - or more or less - of ordained ministry you have not lost sight of what is important. That you can say with Paul as he will later write in his second letter to Timothy *You have fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith.*

Having said that, there are ironies that this is the epistle for today. In this particular passage, Paul addresses the issue of Timothy's youth. Even 30 years ago, the women being ordained were mostly not particularly young. (Kevin and Hayden might have been but that's a different story). You came to ordination with many years of experience in life and in ministry. The issue was it being recognised by the church.

The other irony of course is that this passage occurs in a letter often used to argue against the ordination of women. 1 Timothy 2 is one of the key passages, along with say 1 Corinthians 14 used to argue against ordaining women. Narelle Jarret has just died and I remember her having to argue

at Moore College Not to make that the pastoral epistle for first years. It is worth keeping in mind the question St Paul is always asking himself in his letters, especially the pastoral epistles: what is best for the gospel? What will enable more people to hear the good news of Jesus Christ? What will enable people to stay rooted and grow deeper in their faith?

At the time St Paul was concerned about too much too soon. Now my very strong hunch is he would give a different answer to those questions if he was writing his letter today. Now it is more a case of too little too late. And a church characterised by diversity and inclusion is far more likely to attract people today.

And to focus on passages like 1Timothy 2 and 1Corinthians 14 is like asking about marriage in the bible and gravitating towards the divorce texts. There is the question of what women actually did in the bible. They led, they prophesied, they taught, they were apostles, and they were local church mentors. They were exceptions whom God raised above the norm of the patriarchal culture or cultures they were part of in order to accomplish God's will. Women such as Miriam, Deborah and Huldah Priscilla, Junia and Phoebe Not to mention Mary, the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Which brings us our gospel – John's account of the empty tomb.

Mary Magdalene doesn't feature in John's gospel until her appearance, with the other Marys, at the foot of the cross. John has told us nothing of her history; the little we know, we know from the other gospels.

But her place in this gospel is spectacular. She is the first apostle, the apostle to the apostles: the first to bring the news that the tomb was empty. And then a greater privilege yet: the first to see, to meet, to speak with the risen master himself.

She was not expecting the Resurrection. That is why, when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb in the dark and saw that the stone had been removed, she ran to Peter and the others with the news that Jesus' body had been stolen. What other explanation could there be for an empty tomb?

And so the men run to see for themselves if the body has been stolen. It was the sight of the cloths that revealed to them what was otherwise unthinkable. No grave robber would stop to unwrap the winding sheet. Jesus' body had simply passed through them.

Something extraordinary has happened. Mary still doesn't understand - she stands outside the tomb weeping. And then she looks in and sees two angels who ask her why she is crying. *They have taken away* - my hope, my dreams ... *my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him*. Then she turns around and sees someone whom she intuitively thinks is the gardener. No - but yes: This is the new creation. Jesus is the beginning of it.

'Mary!' 'Come on! Don't you know me?' 'Do not hold on to me, things are going to be different yes because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers ... Something has altered, decisively. Something has been achieved. A new world, a new relationship in which the disciples can know God the way Jesus knows God, as intimate children, Everyone who follows Jesus is a beloved son or daughter. *'... But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."'*

Mary is not upset by this. She doesn't feel it as a rebuff. She has business in hand. She has been commissioned. Once again she is the apostle to the apostles. 'I've seen the Lord, and this is what he said!' Backed up when Jesus appears later in the evening to his disciples behind closed doors saying 'Peace be with you'.

If someone in the first century had wanted to invent a story about people seeing Jesus, they wouldn't have dreamed of giving the star part to a woman. Let alone Mary Magdalene. Yet Mary is modelling what it means to live in the light of the resurrection, new creation. She is modelling what it means to be an agent of new creation. She is modelling the trajectory of Scripture. She is modelling what it means to say yes to God's call – Yes Here I am as the prophet Isaiah did.

In these few verses of Isaiah 6 we see Isaiah's being gifted a big vision of God. Whereas Mary's vision of God (and Paul's for that matter on the road to Damascus) is enlarged through experiencing the immanence of God, Isaiah experiences God as holy – transcendent and righteous (vv 1-4). It is an awesome view of God and the seraphs by their words and actions show the appropriate response: reverence, service and praise.

There is also a profound element of surprise in this commissioning. What is surprising, if you have read the first five chapters of the book of Isaiah, is the way Isaiah identifies so completely, so deeply with his fellow Israelites. We see a deep awareness of Isaiah's own sinfulness, his own weakness. And so a profound experience of the grace of God And on that basis willing to say *Here I am*. Willing to be commissioned. To serve and be spent in God's service whatever the cost. When you

said *Here I am* – ready and willing to be commissioned by the church, That is, when you were asked in the February of 1992 Do you believe you are called to this ministry? And you answered *I believe I am called* ... and stood for the remainder of the examination It was a profound moment. And for some an unwelcome moment.

Thirty years ago I was completing my fourth year at Moore Theological College in Sydney. I was very aware of Scandrett versus Dowling which marked the beginning of the year, (And at this point I do want to pause and acknowledge the male champions - Owen Dowling and other ordaining bishops yes, Also Rupert Hammond and all those men who see the gifts of women and have encouraged them in ministry.

As I said I was very aware of Scandrett versus Dowling, The decision of General Synod and the ordinations that went ahead before and afterwards around Australia. In many ways it is a surprise that it has been me 20 and 30 years later marking the occasion in this Diocese as Bishop. It might have come for some as an unwelcome surprise. Yet for you, the women preparing to be ordained that day, it was a profound experience of grace. It is by God's grace, only by God's grace that any of us can say *I will*.

30 years on – there are still a number of Dioceses that refuse to ordain women. I can't speak for Canberra and Goulburn but I know in Melbourne I am very conscious the number of women leading parishes is less than a quarter. 30 years on from now will there be women serving in all three order of ordained ministry? It is a very real question.

God has gifted each of you. And the movement for the ordination of women is all about not neglecting the gift that is in you.

Today those women ordained on the eve of St Thomas will be presented with Certificates – with the names of all those women who were ordained 30 years ago. I was writing this sermon on All Saints - Beth Allison Barr from the context of evangelical Southern Baptist America in *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* – writes:

Women stand with a great cloud of witnesses. We always have. It is time, far past time, for us to remember.

Her argument is women need to be written back into history. It is about changing the future by more accurately understanding our past. As she names the reality of patriarchy, she also celebrates the cloud of witnesses Writers such as Christine de Pizan, Dorothy L. Sayers, The early women martyrs and mystics including St Perpetua, Julian of Norwich and Theresa of Avila, and Leaders like Hildegard of Bingen and those already mentioned deacon Phoebe, Junia as an apostle and Priscilla as co-worker. The challenge is that so many young women today do not know of them.

The names on these certificates –

Daphne May

Ruth Dudley (deceased)

Margaret Streatfield

Gill Varcoe

Vicky Cullen

Anne Dudzinski

Gail Tabor

Elaine Gifford

Julie Kelley (deceased)

Pam Philips

Anne Dittmar

they are, you are, we will be the cloud of witnesses for women today. As we celebrate these last 30 years, let's be praying for the future of the ministry of both women and men Ordained and lay within the Anglican Church.