



Sermon given by the Bishop of Chichester at the commissioning of the Authorised Lay Ministers on January 11 at Chichester Cathedral.

So, the Christmas feast has been celebrated, and now the diets can begin. I do notice a slight increase in the number of people out jogging, even in Chichester. Some look distinctly uncomfortable. And for those who dislike outdoor activity, there's always the possibility of installing a running machine. A priest friend of mine has even put one in the crypt of his church, hoping not to be seen running on it very slowly and very heavily. However, social media has got the better of him, we have now all seen the pictures!

And in all this fervent endeavour to chase after a fitter, leaner future, I am reminded of the 18th century hymn that is a metrical version of Psalm 42:

As pants the hart for cooling streams, When heated in the chase,
So longs my soul, O God, for thee, And thy refreshing grace.

The author of this hymn has seen in the psalm a reference to hunting; the hart or stag, is being pursued for its life and in the heat of that deadly enterprise, it longs simply to stop and drink from the water of a cooling stream.

Today's focus on the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan turns our attention to the significance of this event and the power of water as a symbol in Christian life.

Being thirsty is one of the great dramas of the Bible. It's the backdrop to finding a wife for Isaac, in the Old Testament, in order to perpetuate the covenant God made with Abraham, Isaac's father. It is when he is thirsty that Jesus encounters the woman at a well in Samaria, and reveals the universality of worship, in spirit and truth, as the true vocation of the human race. To satisfy the thirst for celebration, Jesus turns into wine, at the wedding feast in Cana, and it is water and blood that flow from his side as in death, he hangs upon the cross to offer us the freedom from fear and death for which we fundamentally long. And so the hymn continues:

For thee, my God, the living God, My thirsty soul doth pine:
O when shall I behold thy face, Thou Majesty Divine!

This speaks to us about something fundamental to our faith and Christian identity as the baptised. It reminds us that baptism is the beginning of a search for the only thing that satisfies our deepest thirst: seeing God in all God's glory and majesty, and thereby seeing ourselves as God intends us to be.

Those of you who are being commissioned today as authorised lay ministers will, I hope, have at the centre of your mind and heart these words drawn from Psalm 42 as the starting point of all our apostolic work and endeavour.

You have been heroic in giving time to preparation for this new expression of your baptismal life and calling. You have examined the scriptures and the accumulated wisdom that we have inherited from Christians who have gone before us in the faith. You have reflected on the complexities and contradictions of our own time and the challenges we face in forging a language, in words and the media that illuminate faith, with which to communicate the unchanging truth of the love of God for an age that lives for novelty and change.

The ministry that we are inviting you now to undertake must always be an expression of your deep and abiding thirst to see the face of God, the Majesty Divine and to nurture that longing in other people. From this flows all our apostolic life of witness, proclamation and service.

When Jesus emerges from the waters of the river Jordan he sees heaven open and the Spirit of God, as a dove, descending on him.

We tend to have a very weak understanding of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit – sometimes presented as the poor relation in the equal life of the Triune Godhead. I once saw a poster that proclaimed, “God bless the Holy Spirit”, which sort of suggested that the Holy Spirit could do better, perhaps.

But in the fullness of Trinitarian life the Holy Spirit is also the face of God, the “other person” of the Holy Trinity who looks into the face of the Father and of the Son, the other person in whom the Father sees himself, and the Son sees himself and, in both Father and Son, all that the Spirit knows and all that the Spirit does is seen by the Spirit with joy and delight.

When Jesus sees the Spirit, it is the truth about himself that he is seeing, the truth of being God. And so we should be all the more amazed and humbled and delighted when we reminded by St Paul that the Spirit has been poured into our hearts, the Spirit by which we cry, Abba Father. This is the Spirit who stirs within us the thirst for life in its eternal perfection, the beginnings of which we can taste even now, on earth.

Just as the ministry that followed from the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan made demands of his time, his engagement with society, with conflict and misunderstanding, so your baptismal identification with him will make similar demands upon each of you. And just as his ministry was entirely sustained by his complete union with the Father and the Holy Spirit, so your apostolic work must deepen your identification with Jesus in the understanding of obedience to the Father’s will, and the delight of knowing and doing that will that is the Spirit’s work.

From this we should derive a strong sense of the dignity of this apostolic work of service. The gifts you have been given for serving God’s mission of love and salvation are the sign that in each of you there is a unique capacity to bring to that mission a manifestation of God’s love that no one else can give. But we must also always remember these words of St Paul: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ”. The work we undertake is done by us as a work of love, but it is God’s work and must never be misappropriated as our own.

In particular, I wish to say to those of you who will be permitted on certain occasions to preach, that I tremble, as you must tremble, to undertake this work. The sacred task of speaking of the mysteries of faith, of the authority of scripture, of the dignity of Christian experience and the truth of Christian doctrine is properly an awesome one for which we must be ready to give an account when we meet the Lord in the mercy and truth of judgement. This ministry of preaching is to serve directly those who, in the words of the Book of

Common Prayer, are “the sheep of Christ, which he bought with his death and for whom he shed his blood”. That is the seriousness of the task that we undertake in daring to enter the pulpit, in whatever form it might take.

Finally, I wish to share with all of you an urgent concern about sustaining this ministry for which you are to be commissioned. In his description of the joy of the gospel, Pope Francis says this about the needs of people engaged in apostolic ministry: “We need...places where faith itself in the crucified and risen Jesus is renewed, where the most profound questions and daily concerns are shared, where deeper discernment about our experiences of life itself is undertaken in the light of the Gospel, for the purpose of directing individual and social decisions towards the good and the beautiful”.

I hope, that in partnership with the priests alongside whom you will serve, you will be attentive to finding how and where your faith is renewed and discernment of the Gospel is deepened. It must offer that well-spring of living water for which our thirsty souls do pine, and it must deepen our longing to behold the face of God, the Majesty Divine and to bring others to the knowledge of that vision.