

30th Anniversary Eucharist
Chichester Cathedral
13th May
Ambassadors of Christ

It is so good to be able to gather together here today to celebrate the 30th anniversary of women being ordained to the priesthood. And as Bishop Ruth said it is almost exactly 30 years to the day that that happened in Chichester diocese. That service happened on the 15th of May at Saint Swithun in East Grinstead.

Those of us who were ordained more recently are so grateful to those of you who were the first and often the only in the churches where God called you to serve.

From this position I have the privilege of being able to look out and see everyone gathered here this morning. Thank you so much for being here. Thank you to the women clergy, the deacons priests and Bishop thank you for your partnership in the gospel, for your service, for your encouragement and support of one another. Thank you to the male Clergy who have championed us. There have been times when we lacked the power to open doors and we thank you for those who opened those doors for us and opened up opportunities for ministry. And for all of you who aren't Clergy and who have cheered us on. A huge thank you.

I want to spend a few minutes today reflecting on the image that Paul uses in his letter to the church at Corinth.

He speaks of **ambassadors for Christ**.

I don't know what comes into your mind when you think about an ambassador

I can't help thinking of a certain advert from quite a few years ago.

The scene is a fancy party in a very glamorous setting with chandeliers and gold decorations. Champagne is flowing and on a silver platter is brought in a huge pyramid of Ferrero Rocher chocolates. It's the ambassadors reception.

The ambassadorial ministry of your average priest is not so much champagne and chocolates more a cup of tea and a custard cream.

Ambassadors are sent by the sovereign or a state into another country. They go to live in that other country as the official representative of the one who sent them.

Ambassadors are sent to all different kinds of places and people. And for this all different kinds of ambassadors are needed.

Until 1994 the church had many wonderful male priests .

But since then they've been joined by so many women who bring all of their gifts and experience into this priestly ministry and into the diverse communities to which we are sent. And we need, the mission of God I believe needs, this beautiful diversity.

And so since then, men and women have been ministering as priests and I believe that's been a real blessing to the communities to whom they've been sent.

When I'm having some downtime, I quite like to watch a cookery program. Recently I watched the latest series of the Great British Menu and in the final episode they cook the banquet at the British ambassadors residence in Paris. They interviewed the British ambassador who is a woman, Menna Rawlings. She said she was the first female ambassador to France after 36 male ambassadors going back 220 years.

Does that sound familiar women priests? 220 years is nothing, many of us have been the first woman priest for say, 900 years!

She was asked about being an ambassador and she said that she came from a very ordinary background and went to an ordinary comprehensive school.

I like that image of how ambassadors are not always what you would expect. Firstly, she was a woman and secondly she had this very ordinary background.

And there is something about the unexpected.

For many of us as women priests over the last 30 years we have found ourselves as the ones that maybe were not quite expected!

But we are in really good company because in the Bible the first witnesses of the resurrection were women. They were the ones entrusted with the news

of this vital event in history. Certainly not what was expected at the time, but just the right people at that particular time.

Of course, the diverse communities that make up this Diocese need different people for them.

So be encouraged, especially the women priests, God is calling us with all our differences of backgrounds, gifts, race and age for those very diverse communities. Because the mission of God needs a diverse people of God in order to reach the people that he loves. And in fact, even greater diversity is still needed in the ministry of men and women in the church.

There is this beautiful picture of God sending all kinds of people to preach his love to all kinds of people.

In the Bible passage, Paul tells us that we have a very particular message to bring and that's the message of reconciliation between God and human beings.

This reconciliation is something that he himself has done. He has reconciled all people to himself through Jesus' death on the cross.

This is a beautiful message of God's love for all people.

It's a message that we carry in his grace, in word and sacrament and action. To the parishes and workplaces He calls us into.

And He doesn't call us to do this on our own. He equips us with the Holy Spirit.

We are in this time in the churches year between Ascension and Pentecost. When Jesus' first followers were told to wait to start the mission until they received the power of the Holy Spirit.

And in fact in the ordination service it says that this calling too heavy for us to bear on our own so we should pray earnestly for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And this is Jesus's free gift to all of us. The gift that makes his love real in our lives and in our hearts. The gift that gives us the power and the wisdom and the love for this ministry that he has called us to. We are not alone in this ministry.

Of course when Paul wrote those words, he wasn't writing them to women priests celebrating 30 years of ordination to the priesthood!

He was writing to all followers of Christ and so this ambassadorial ministry is something for each one of us. Each one of us is entrusted with this message to take into the diverse places in which we live, and the diverse places in which we work. All very particularly called to take this beautiful message of reconciliation, that God has himself, in love, reconciled all people to himself. It's a beautiful, unique message that we have. It's full of grace, it's full of the life transforming love of God. And we are called to do this together as a household of faith in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

Rev'd Canon Helen Garratt

13th May 2024