

A service to celebrate 20 years of the ordination of women to the priesthood in the church in Wales

Ruth 1. 16-18; Responsorial Psalm 25; Philippians 2. 1-11 and John 20. 11-18)

1997. Many will remember it as the year Princess Diana died – Mother Theresa too. These two women will undoubtedly be remembered in history. It was also the year when JK Rowling came on centre stage as she launched her first Harry Potter book.

But of course today we remember 1997 as the year which began with more than 60 women ordained priest in the Church of Wales, marking the start of a significant new and long awaited chapter.

And today in this 20th anniversary service we are giving immense thanks for all the women who have served as priests in the Church of Wales - For their faithful following of Christ; and for the fruitfulness of their ministry reflected in different people's lives in many different ways.

Once again we are giving thanks for men and women and children who have encouraged, campaigned and prayed for the inclusion of women in all three orders of ordained ministry: the diaconate, the priesthood and the episcopate.

It is very good knowing that in two weeks' time a woman who was priested in 1997 will be consecrated as Bishop - and Bishop Joanna will be the first female Bishop in Wales.

And of course, amidst our thankfulness today we remember those who are no longer with us: whether priests of the past 20 years; or women for whom priesthood was denied prior to 1997; or faithful supporters - All those no longer here on earth yet numbered among the saints and that great cloud of witnesses which surrounds us in this Eucharist as we join the angels of heaven in their unending song of glory to God.

Today is about standing in the present, looking back at the past, as we walk into the future. And at the heart of it all is God and the purposes of God that will not be thwarted.

Because of course today is not primarily about women or an institution (The Anglican Church or the Church in Wales). Today is about the Kingdom of God.

One day, as we heard in those words from St Paul to the Philippians, every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. One day God's work of transformation will be complete. Today we are celebrating the breaking in of God's Kingdom.

God's decisive 'yes' of love for all people (equal and precious) began in the past at the very beginning; was revealed in Jesus Christ; greets us in the present through the work of the Holy Spirit; and points to the future of God's complete restoration - the new earth and heaven – Justice and peace fully present and God dwelling with us.

That's why today we can celebrate even though we are acutely aware of the mess and pain of our world. Indeed the messy and painful places in the Church.

We are not denying any of that, and today is not about escaping the mess and the suffering, whether close to home or far away. But as we celebrate 20 years of the ordination of women to the priesthood here in Wales, this is a Kingdom celebration. And it's fitting that it's the season of epiphany - the revelation of who God is. Today speaks of God's Kingdom work of transformation.

And as we recall the past 20 years and acknowledge the present and the future, each of us is part of the story.

Every day we each face choices and decisions, large and small, always aware that we make those choices and decisions within boundaries and contexts defined by the decisions and actions of others - whether that be the government, family and friends, The Church .. - But we are each invited to make courageous choices and decisions, to hold onto hope, and to live with imagination looking forward to God's future. God's kingdom is here and God's kingdom is coming

In our Old Testament reading and our Gospel reading there was a context framed and bounded by the decision of others; and in each of those contexts an individual woman took a risk - made a courageous choice - not knowing where it would lead but believing it was a life-giving decision, even though it might have felt foolish at the time.

Ruth and Naomi find themselves in a place of bereavement, a situation out of their control; And Naomi has made the decision to return to her people in Israel. Ruth's context has been framed and bounded by the decisions of others, both in the past and now here in the present as she stands with her mother-in-law. And Ruth has a choice. And her choice is decisive "where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God."

It was a gutsy move - perhaps seemingly foolish - but I believe Ruth knew it was about life and hope. And that choice was to shape the future in a way that neither Ruth nor Naomi could see. In the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel the apostle traces the birth of the Messiah back through Ruth.

In our gospel reading we encountered Mary Magdalene. As a woman in first century Palestine she knew all about life being shaped by the decisions of others. She also knew the life-changing love she had experienced in encountering Jesus. And here she is now in the garden distressed and weeping. Her context has been radically changed by others putting Jesus to death, burying him and now seemingly removing his body. We can feel Mary's sense of powerlessness, and yet even in that place of immense distress, seemingly powerless to change anything, Mary still wants to act - she wants to be in the place where Jesus is. "Tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away" says Mary to the stranger in the garden. And then she hears her name spoken: 'Mary' - And suddenly the present moment is transformed - Jesus is alive. And in those few moments I imagine that Mary thought everything was going to be as it had been before. Her choice was to cling to Jesus - hold onto what had been - and even dare to imagine the future being just like the past - Mary at Jesus' side through the ups and downs of daily life.

But that is not to be Mary's context: "Do not hold onto me" says Jesus - and he speaks strange words of ascending to the Father; and Jesus gives Mary a message to take to the other disciples. And like Ruth in the face of a decisive moment, shaped by others, Mary has a choice – And she says yes to going to the disciples and telling them what she has seen. And just as Ruth's 'yes' was an important link in the line of salvation history, so too Mary Magdalene. Often called the apostle to the apostles, she is a key connection in the line of those bearing witness to Christ's resurrection.

Both these women, Ruth and Mary, have played a significant part in God's story which has brought us to this present day. Both of these women have made significant choices in contexts shaped by decisions made by others.

And throughout the history of the Church, women and men and children have taken life-giving risky decisions in contexts which have been shaped by the decision of others - and those risky and life-giving decisions have in turn shaped history and welcomed the further breaking in of God's kingdom as their yes has pointed to the hope and life of the future yet to come.

Today we are particularly thankful for all those women who have been courageous in saying 'yes' to God's call to ordination - Women who have made decisions in contexts shaped by the decisions of others – sometimes contexts in which there has been opposition or apathy or complacency. Yet, women have taken risk and made choices which have often been costly but which have been about holding fast to future hope and the continual breaking in of God's kingdom.

And yet as we give thanks for those women, and as we rightly celebrate today, this is not simply about women or indeed priests...This is about the whole people of God.

Yes, we are indeed giving thanks for the wholeness of ordained priesthood and the fact that men and women can now minister side by side as priests in God's church, reflecting more fully who God is; But as we celebrate 20 years of the ordination of women to the priesthood in Wales we are ultimately celebrating the ministry of the *whole* people of God - lay and ordained - seeking to grow more fully into the likeness of Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit as we share Christ's transforming hope and love with others.

And amid our celebrations we recognise our frailty and our failings.

The apostle Paul writing to the Christians in Philippi says "Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

And perhaps this is the place to name the truth that for some in the Church an anniversary of the ordination of women as priests is not a day of celebration. We are confident in our celebration today - and rightly so - but we need to continually pray for the mind of Christ as we seek to follow Christ together in places of enormous difference and disagreement.

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Each of us lives our lives in a context constantly framed by the decisions of others - sometimes that will open doors for us and speak of freedom and at other times the context set for us by the actions and decisions of others will feel restrictive - but each of us still has a choice about how we respond and how we say "yes to God's life and love and hope within that context.

And today as we stand in the present, like Mary Magdalene may we not cling either to the things we don't want to change or to the wounds of the past.

I began by reminding us of a few significant events in 1997. The James Bond film that came out that year was Tomorrow Never Dies.

With God there is always the tomorrow of the future. One day God's kingdom will be fully present - all will be restored and transformed. For now we live with our eyes and hearts focused on that future and as we give thanks for the past 20 years and the ministry of the whole people of God here in Wales, may we recommit ourselves to saying yes to God - to make choices which are life-giving, and which will often be risky because we cannot see the exact path ahead – but choices which are about enabling us and others to become the people God has created us to be - To echo the response we used in our psalm: "here I am, I come to do your will Lord, I have heard your call. Your love is in my heart "

Amen