

Margaret's first Sermon as Reader

Yesterday, in the Cathedral, I was admitted into the Office of Reader in the Church of England, and then licensed to serve here at All Saints. It involved putting on these robes and being presented with this blue scarf, this Bible, and this licence, as well as promises made and prayers offered. This was all completed with the confirmation of the licence here this morning.

The Robes

Would anyone like to have a closer look? Children?

First, we have the **cassock**. Those of us who did the Youth Project Christmas quiz, have learnt that this comes from an Italian word. It has been worn by the clergy for centuries and dates back to a time when it was common for most people to wear something like it. It's a bit like a coat, and can be worn out and about by anybody, really.

Secondly, we have the **surplice**. This comes from a Latin word, that basically means 'over the coat'. It is worn over the cassock for worship purposes, as a sign of respect for the holiness of the worship

Thirdly, there is the **blue scarf**, which indicates the office of Reader, and distinguishes us from vicars – even though we might look like one with the cassock and surplice! These scarves were adopted as recently as 1969, which is also the year when women were allowed to become Readers.

All these robes are known as choir dress, and we don't normally see them at our Sunday morning Eucharist, where those at the front wear white albs, as you can see, and which usually I will do. These garments also have a long history in the Church, dating back to the time when they were standard dress for the ancient Romans. If you would like to know more about the other items David and Tariro are wearing, please ask them later.

The word 'surplice' might sound the same as 'surplus', but don't be misled as 'surplus' comes from a different root, meaning 'in excess'. There are those who question the robes, thinking them 'surplus to requirements', but there is the view, which I share, that they are equalisers, that reduce the distinctiveness of those at the front, and give continuity down the years. They are about service to the Church.

The Bible

I did have one already! But we have been given this rather fine edition, because at the heart of what readers do is the public ministry of preaching and teaching the faith 'uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures', as well as in reason and tradition.

The Licence

This gives me permission from the Bishop to perform the duties of a Reader at this particular time in this particular place. It also makes me accountable. I have a responsibility to you all to work within the teachings and authority of the Church, and to be answerable to you if I seem to fall short.

The Role of Reader

We are very used to having Readers assisting with public worship here at All Saints, but numbers were dwindling with Mike's illness, Simon's ordination, and Gill's untimely death. Gill knew I was training to be a Reader and passed on some of her books to me, which provide a blessing of continuity, and memory.

John was my sponsor in the cathedral yesterday, and now together, he and I, together with Claire (who has duties round the diocese) make up the active Reader team.

Our three readings today each provide pointers for understanding the role. Our Old Testament reading comes from the Book of Nehemiah, which is the last of a quartet of books, the first three being 1 and 2 Chronicles, and Ezra. The books record the history of Israel and Judah up to the time of the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, and the temple. In our reading we see the people assembled in the Square by the Water Gate. Ezra stood on a wooden platform and, with great ceremony, he read out to them the Book of the Law of Moses. This book might have been the entire Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible; or it might have been just a part of it. Together with some Levitical helpers, Ezra read from the Book, 'making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read' not a bad description of the most visible part of today's Reader role, from about 2,500 years ago! This sacred day for the resettled Israelites, must have been quite a marathon, and afterwards they celebrated with 'choice food and sweet

drinks', and they sent out a share to the needy. I hope you will all be able to follow this pattern, and to share in some food on our Square after this service.

In their book '*Reader Ministry Explored*', Cathy Rowling and Paula Gooder¹ discuss the role of 'Readers, or Lectors' in the very early church, making the point that most people were illiterate and so needed to hear the Scriptures read out. This might be seen as the origin of the role, which was learnt from the practice in the synagogues. The skill of reading for oneself is a relatively new one in our history.

Turning to our NT reading, we learn that we are all baptised into one body, which is made up of many parts, which have equal concern for each other, and equal participation in Christ.

There is nothing distinctive about being a Reader. Everything a Reader does can be done by others baptised or ordained into the Church, however, Rowling and Gooder list five characteristics that come together in a Reader who is:

1. Admitted into public ministry by the Church of England.
2. 'Licensed to a local context'
3. A lay minister in the midst of other lay Church members.
4. Trained in Theology
5. Licensed to preach, teach, be involved in pastoral support, to lead some elements of public worship.

These five elements, they say, form the service performed by the Reader. They go on to say that 'Reader Ministry must remain open to God's leading and directing; educated, informed, contextually based, culturally aware and able to respond to contemporary need'.

By the grace of God, I will do my best in all this.

Returning to Paul's brilliant metaphor, each one of the baptised plays our part in the body of Christ. I wonder what part you feel you play. We all need each other's different gifts. For yesterday's service, I had to produce a short statement about my journey of faith, and I included in this the reflection that

¹ Rowling and Gooder, *Reader Ministry Explored* SPCK, 2009

'I feel I am more head than heart in my faith, a balance to redress in prayer. I love the head work, though, it feels like a conversation with the Spirit. This is the way I can serve in the body of Christ while I depend on other members of the Body for their heart wisdom. Together we serve one another.'

By 'heart wisdom' I mean those whose gifts kindle gentle, loving, healing relationship, through, for example, active listening; poetic word-craft; companionable, meditative silence; artistic creativity; musical harmonies; imaginative prayer – habits, and talents that bring us into right relationships with God and each other. These gifts are all wonderfully present at All Saints.

What I call the 'head element' is the analysis of the Biblical and other literature, asking questions about the genre of the writings, how we can understand the history found in them, what we can say about Jesus's self-understanding, and what we can say about the implications for our faith and action. We have been, and still are, wonderfully blessed at All Saints through our connections with great scholars whose contributions have built up the body of the worldwide Church, while they also join in with us here in our little body. It is in engaging with the writings of these and other scholars, where I feel called to be of service to All Saints

If head questions are not really your thing, there is always next week, when different gifts may be brought to the lectern, and we always have each other, as we are all 'a limb or organ of the body of Christ', and all give service to each other in our different ways.

Finally, we turn to our Gospel reading where we see Jesus in his home synagogue. Firstly, we might note the interesting point that Jesus could read, and that there is an expectation that he will read to them and then teach. We see him select a reading from Isaiah 61, and then make the remarkable claim that the reading is fulfilled in the listeners' hearing. Luke portrays Jesus as taking on the mantle of Isaiah of being anointed and sent to turn things round for the disadvantaged of the time: the poor, prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed, and to announce the Year of the Lord's favour.

The idea of 'Year of the Lord's favour' is found in the Pentateuch both as the Sabbatical Year, every seven years, and the Jubilee Year, every 49 or 50 years. It is about giving rest to the land, setting slaves free, remission of debts, and restoring equality between people.

Isaiah's list is about human relationships, and situations where injustice can start to accelerate in the here and now. This Isaiah (there were three), was active around the same time as Nehemiah. He wanted to see the restoration of Judah, and of Jerusalem to its people, and the 'setting free of those who have been crushed'.² This is what the justice, loved of the Lord, would look like to him. It would be like a Jubilee Year.

In the time of Jesus, the issues were different, but there still were those suffering from the poverty, imprisonment, blindness and oppression identified by Isaiah. The oppression was now under the Romans and the Herodian family, but there were still crushed people longing for a year of the Lord's favour, and justice for their times.

In 2014, only about a year before he died, our dear brother, John Hull who was one of the great scholars who was part of this congregation, had a book published called 'Towards the Prophetic Church'.³ In it he talks about faith being both vertical and horizontal. The vertical is our relationship with God, while the horizontal is our relationship with each other, and he argues that 'access to the vertical is impossible unless the horizontal is first recognised'. This was the message of the prophets. So, life in the Kingdom of God begins on Earth, as Jesus announced in the synagogue.

In our own times, the issues are different again, but as Des led us in prayer last week, he named some of them: hypocritical politicians, foodbanks, poverty, starvation in Sudan and Afghanistan, street children in Kenya, vaccine injustice, inequality and racism. We are rightly angry, and seek God's help to be loving and to support the work of Save the Children, Church Action on Poverty, Christian Aid, the B30 Foodbank, and our Youth Project, Lunch Club and Robin Centre.

Des's prayers illustrate All Saints taking our place in the body of Christ, seeking justice in the horizontal on Earth, as well as opening glimpses of

² Isaiah 58:6

³ Hull, John M. *Towards the Prophetic Church*, 2014, SPCK

the vertical, as it is in heaven. I pray that, as one of your Readers, I will be equal to the task of serving you as you serve others, seeking the Kingdom of God in the horizontal and therefore the vertical.