

## **A Celebration of Reader Ministry with Admission and Licensing of Readers**

5<sup>th</sup> September 2021 at Coventry Cathedral.

*Readings: Col.1.15-20 and Acts 8.26-40*

'*All things.*' What we are about is 'all things', everything that is. Not some things, not religion, not church but all things, everything that is, 'the whole earth and all they that dwell therein.' (Ps. 24)

'All things were created through him', writes St John. 'All things were created through him and for him' writes Paul in Colossians. 'All things were created through God and for God', writes the author of Hebrews.

All things. *Panta* in the Greek, used five times by Paul in this short passage. 'All things', everything that is. So, there is no division between sacred and secular in the purposes of God. Our journey and our calling as ministers of the Gospel is to be 'fellow workers' - *synergountes* – in synergy with God - and as agents with God in the coming of his kingdom, until 'the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of the Lord' (Rev.11.15) and 'God is all and in all' (1 Cor.15.28)

Sometimes we can let religion get in the way of God and God's purposes. We see this in the conflicts between Jesus and the religious of his time who constantly seek to challenge, trap and undermine him. We see this also in the teaching of Jesus, for example in the parable of the Good Samaritan and the parable of the Pharisee and tax-collector. When religion gets in the way of expressing the love and compassion of God, it is bad religion. When religion breeds self-righteousness, it is bad religion. When religion prevents us from engaging with the needs of the world, the poor, the hungry, the refugee, it is bad religion.

What we are about is 'life', being alive to God, alive in Christ, alive to the joys and struggles of the world around us, the world for which Christ died. Alive to the presence of God in the ordinary, everyday. 'Teach me my God and King in *all things* thee to see', writes Herbert. Our calling in Christ, writes Ignatius of Loyola, is about seeking and finding God in all things.

What has this got to do with Readers? Everything! All things! Dorothy Sayers, crime writer and poet, in 1942, asks the rhetorical question: 'How can anyone remain interested in a religion which seems to have no concern with nine tenths of life?'

So where is your locus and focus? In the church or in the world? In Jerusalem, a focal point for worship, or in Galilee where so-called ordinary life is lived, where Jesus told his disciples he would meet them, having risen from the dead and where Jesus first called them?

There will be different answers to these questions. Many, perhaps most, of you are involved in sustaining the institutional life of the church, in the building up of the body of Christ through preaching, teaching, nurturing and pastoring. Praise God for your faithful and fruitful witness in his name. This has sometimes been called a '*modal*' model of mission. It is essential. (Let me say in parenthesis in these somewhat febrile times in the Church of England, parish ministry is the bedrock of our life, of our mission, even our *identity* as the Church of England. We are investing heavily in this, with increasing numbers being called to ordination.)

Others of you are more out in Galilee, in chaplaincy roles, in community facing ministries, in places of work, across boundaries. This ministry outside of the institutional life of the church is sometimes called '*sodal*'. It is not, of course, an either or. These are not hermetically sealed categories. All of us need both to be sustained by the sacramental life of the Church and also to engage with those who are not part of the visible church. Just as Philip was both deacon and evangelist, so alive to the promptings and opportunities of the Holy Spirit as we see in his encounter with the Ethiopian.

As Readers, you are trained theologians. You do not need to be as rooted in parish life as parish clergy. You can offer what most clergy cannot. I am speaking now also to those who are not yet Readers who may be sensing a call to Reader ministry. E.M. Forster was famous not only for his novels but for a phrase that has been frequently quoted in his name 'only connect'. 'Only connect the prose and the passion and both will be exalted. Live in fragments no longer'. But now I am saying only connect the sacred and the secular, a Venn diagram which is to become a circle or a globe!

How many people still think the church is all about the church and not about life and God in the midst of ordinary life? People need help in connecting their actual lives with God. Readers, as trained theologians, and some of you, I know, are also spiritual directors, can help to bridge the divide in people's thinking between sacred and secular. Helping people to know that God is *with* them, God is *in* them in the daily circumstances of their lives, whether or not they come to Jerusalem or connect with the parish church. You can help them, to borrow a quote from George Macleod, to 'give glory to God in the high street.' You are called to be not only in Jerusalem, the locus of organized religion and gathered worship, but also out there in Galilee, making connections. There has been considerable research into religious experience and by that I do not mean going to church, but experiences of God, or the beyond in our midst, something more than this physical life, another dimension. Alister Hardy researched this thoroughly and the question he posed to many members of the general public was this:

Have you ever been aware of, or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, that is different from your everyday self?

His view was that spiritual awareness was common to us all irrespective of our backgrounds. I guess we would chime in with this as believe we are all made by God and for relationship with God

His and others' research reveal that between a third and a half of the population have had some such experience. It is a judgement on us as church that most people who have experiences of the transcendent, the beyond in our midst, make no connection with what we are about as church. What opportunities we have to give space to such people to listen to them and learn from them and then gently and prayerfully help them to make connections. The harvest out there is plentiful but the labourers are few who are out there, like Philip, alert to the promptings of the Spirit – or as John V Taylor calls the Spirit - *the Go-between God*. Only connect.

Connections need to be made not only out there in Galilee but also in here, in Jerusalem, in the parish church to help the gathered faithful to connect Sunday with Monday. 'God on Monday' was the title of an industrial missioner Canon of this Cathedral, Simon Phipps, written in 1966 at a time of extraordinary flourishing of the Cathedral expressing so inspiringly and fruitfully that God is in all things, in every part of life.

I read of a Sunday School Teacher, who was also a teacher. She was sharing that she was prayed for sometimes in church as a Sunday school teacher but never for her work as a teacher, Monday to Friday. The church can so easily become church-centric, and Readers, I believe have a particular call to challenge and change church-centricity, to make connections that will affirm the truth that God so loved the world, not the church. We are called to live out this love and you, as Readers, trained theologians, have particular opportunities to do this. I leave you with two questions:

Are you using all your gifts? What connections is God calling you to make?

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