

25th anniversary of the ordination of the first women priests.

Send down your Holy Spirit on your servant for the office and work of a priest in your church.

Those words of prayer, spoken by +Barry on 12 March 1994 changed the church and changed our lives, because for the first time in the Church of England a woman's name was added.

Send down your Holy Spirit on Angela, Waveney, Christine, Judith, Faith, Brenda, Carol, Margaret, Annis, Janet, Susan, Jane, Jean, Karen, Audrey, Charmion, Helen, Glenys, Jilliane, Clare, June, Susan, Susan, Susan, Margery, Sylvia, Judith, Anita, Sheila, Pauline, Dawn, Valerie. The service completed, they/you were sent out as those gospel words put it, go...announce...and you went, and you announced, in word and in sacrament the good news of Christ crucified and risen, a gospel story now proclaimed afresh because of your priesting.

On a busy day up the A 38 at Gloucester cathedral where I was then chaplain, I glimpsed part of the broadcast service and I marvelled at your serenity as well as your smiles as you faced the world's cameras. Robbin had prepared and supported you well, and I am delighted she can be here to preside today. A few days later in Gloucester, Canon David Welander, whom some of you may remember, came into evensong with a bemused expression, and told us that he had returned from the morning eucharist to find his young granddaughter robed in surplice and stole and processing up and down the hall. I suspect **that** was a converting moment for that pretty traditional clergyman.

But back in Bristol Cathedral, as with any group of ordinands there would have been a range of emotions here in Bristol on 12 March. For some of those ordained this was still early days in public ministry, and your vocation had been nurtured in a church which had already signified its assent to change. For others, the ordination was a culmination of years of ministry first as Lay Worker and as Deaconess before Deaconing became legal in 1987. Nationally there were some who ruled themselves out of ordination as priest because of their age, and some bishops who would not priest those women who were retired.

One of the stories which I took with me through 1994 as, with other women I faced an interview to discern whether I should, indeed, be priested, was of one of the women whose ministry had inspired me, Elsie Baker who served as parish worker and then Deaconess in Southwark Diocese, often as Deaconess in charge of her parish. By 1994 was well into her 80s. Her bishop came to visit her early in 1994 and said 'Elsie, I am afraid I can't ordain you.'

Elsie had been expecting that news, which she received with equanimity. Bishop Roy said ‘Elsie, I believe God called and ordained you as his priest many years ago. I can only confirm that ordination, and I do so with great joy’.

March 12 here in Bristol, and the ordination days which followed, around England were days of affirmation, confirmation and transformation as those new priests inhabited their role, finding their ways of using the texts and rubrics the church provides, and sometimes pushing at the boundaries, as they gathered, absolved, presided and blessed. We were sent, and for the most part, were received with joy, not least by women whose lives we touched and who sensed in a new way their identity as beloved by God and witness to the risen Christ.

That experience was familiar across the Anglican Communion. Florence Li Tim Oi was the first Anglican woman to be priested 50 years earlier in Hong Kong in 1944. The story of her subsequent experience of marginalisation by the Communion and persecution by the Chinese government has, at times, given me courage to persevere. Late in life she moved to Canada where her curate wrote in 1985 *‘Florence is not very different from anyone else. She celebrates in a quiet, friendly manner. She’s a tiny person, so if you are used to a priest who is six foot three and bearded, she is visually startling...when she celebrates, her congregation see someone very like themselves; someone who has experienced plenty and poverty, with experiences of war, of grandnieces and nephews...and bunions...there is a richness in her relationship, particularly with the older English speaking women. Instead of being a wild change for them, she brings the liturgy much closer to them’*.

Li Tim Oi’s sister priests have, over the many years since, had similar experiences as they have reached out as signs that, in Christ, the differences of gender and race and social status have been trampled down.

But as with Mary of the gospel, sent to tell of the risen Christ when women were not permitted by law and custom to be witnesses, we have not always been well received individually and institutionally. There is still work to be done in this pioneering diocese, where the number of women incumbents is still under 30%, where the majority of self supporting priests are women, where there is currently only one Woman who is Area Dean and where senior posts aren’t yet attractive to women candidates. There is much work still to be done and I commit myself to working to change this.

I am aware of the theological barriers that are still in place, in a Christian church which still defaults to seeing men as normatively human and women as defective and misbegotten

I am aware of the ecclesiological barriers which are still in place with the Act of Synod, and more recently the 5 Guiding Principles, continuing to overshadow the full acceptance of our priesthood.

I am aware of the organisational barriers which are still in place with, nationally and locally, maternity leave, flexible working and family friendly working not yet established.

I am aware of the cultural barriers which are still in place in an anxious church which has, in recent years, given heroic leadership pride of place.

There are still moments when with Mary, we weep at the tomb, when we re-live our own particular experience of the paschal mystery, in deep doubt and lost hope. We grieve and forget the love of Christ, we cling when Christ says 'go', we stay silent when we have been commissioned to speak. And yet, again and again, Christ calls us by our names and reminds us that we are his own.

And by the grace of the Holy Spirit change does happen though, as with Mary in the garden, sometimes it isn't recognisable because it is happening where we did not plan or expect it. In this year when we celebrate the 50th anniversary of women's admission to the office of Lay Reader (Licensed Lay Minister in this diocese) Lay women have not just influence but power in the Church Commissioners, the church's funding body. Two of the four Episcopal commissioners are women, and all three senior lay commissioners, Eve Poole leading work on the governance and funding of cathedrals, Caroline Spelman speaking for us in the House of Commons (and, more generally, at the moment working politically to bring our politicians together across party lines, to enormous personal cost), and Loretta Minghella who carries overall responsibility for the Commissioners investments. At our meeting a month ago Caroline Spelman, aware of her precarious political position, and wanting us to notice what had happened, produced a photo portrait of this team to hang in Church House alongside the many many portraits of men.

Today is a day for looking back and for looking ahead, and for broadening our perspective. Last week Bishop Barry wrote in a message read in Lambeth palace chapel at the service of celebration some here attended.

He said: *I have observed and received the ministry of women in parishes, but also in chaplaincies; hospitals and hospices, schools, universities and prisons and know what an innovative and positive contribution women priests have made.*

But typically Bishop Barry didn't stop there, continuing with a challenge...

“Perhaps today we might give a thought for all those women, worldwide whose vocations to the priesthood have still been neither recognised nor tested.”

As the planning begins here for the Lambeth Conference next year, and remembering Li Tim Oi, perhaps there is a particular task for this diocese, with its many international links in Uganda and beyond, to press the question of those whose voices are still not heard, and whose testimony is still not believed, that the whole of creation may know the presence and power of Christ crucified and risen.

+Viv Bristol

St Patrick's Day 2019