

PENTECOST 20 | OCTOBER 23RD 2022

ST JAMES KING STREET – WOMEN’S ORDINATION

THE REV’D JORIE RYAN

Joel 2.23-32

Psalm 65

2 Timothy 4. 6-8,16-18

Luke 18.15-30

At this time, we are celebrating a hundred years of women’s ordination as deacons. The group Christians for Biblical Equality had the splendid idea to have as many women as possible preaching in churches around Sydney on this day not as provocation but as a symbol of hope, healing and reconciliation. And more...?

‘There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.’ Elie Wiesel.

So, am I here as a protest? An Anglican priest in a diocese which does not recognise my calling or my priesthood. And is there injustice here? Are we wrong, to honour women who believe they have been called to this life? Are we in ‘error’ as some like to say and then throw Bible verses at us with such conviction it is a wonder we are not knocked to the ground. And of course, we can gently or not so gently send some back which gets us nowhere.

We read Joel this morning and happy day, ‘O children be glad, rejoice in God...’ We are given abundance – a fruitful earth, enough rain, food wine, oil, plenty to feast upon. God’s spirit is poured out – regardless of who you are. We are given full rein to truly celebrate the God who loves us – to celebrate being exactly who we are. We are not constrained or excluded or measured. We are given Hope. We are exposed to the full bounty of God and in return we are called to prophesy, to

dream, to have visions of the kingdom of God. In other words, to roll up our metaphorical sleeves and get on with making this kingdom. But what is this kingdom like? How do we ‘see, feel, taste, hear’ what God wants for us?

Welcome to the upside world of Christ. The place where children are valued – those who are young in years and those who are young in faith. In the words of Luke’s gospel, Jesus blesses children and suggests that unless we come trusting as a child, we will not fully get the message. Madness. What about hermeneutics? What about doctrine? Tradition? The Law? In that same reading Jesus continues to turn the world upside down. The rich young ruler is asked to give up what he has if he wants to truly follow Christ. Not merely the trappings of power and wealth but the safe paradigms of a known world. Give up your neighbourhood, the places where people know you and know your position. Give up your set ways. Give up who you thought you were and take the risk and follow.

And I want to suggest that this is the way for all those who accept a call to ordination and in particular women. Ever since the early days of the church women have played a role. Yet, increasingly over the centuries women were squashed into small boxes of ministry and told, ‘This is your box. Stay in it.’ And most of us did. It was the brave ones who heeded the call of God more than carping about their place in the world and the church.

Female Anglican priests and bishops worldwide (let’s add all of us male and female) owe a debt to our denomination’s wonder woman, Rev Dr Florence Li Tim-Oi.

Li Tim-Oi’s unusual ordination took place in 1944, during the Sino-Japanese War. The exceptional circumstance of the Japanese military occupation meant that her home parish of Macau was inaccessible for priests to visit. So

parishioners had no way of receiving the sacraments, including the Eucharist. In order to support the island parish, Bishop R O Hall ordained Li Tim-Oi as a 'Priest in the Church of God', ensuring her community's access to the Eucharist.

Bishop Hall told William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time: "I'm not an advocate for the ordination of women. I am, however, determined that no prejudices should prevent the congregations committed to my care having the sacraments of the Church." Note, that this was an ordination of expediency – nothing to do with Biblical teaching. In one way it was Jesus' upside-down kingdom in action. It was more important for people to meet together at the table than worrying about whether women really were able to have a priestly vocation.

Jesus said, 'Love God with everything you have and love your neighbour as yourself.' Many, I think have no idea of what this really means and how to live it. How can it be 'love' for one group of people to tell (force) another group of people what their relationship with God is to be. We can broaden that out (for I believe that the 'church' is not some enclave that exists separate to the rest of society) to ask how can it be truth for one group to tell another group in any sphere of life how they are to 'be'? If the church is still one of the keepers of our social fabric (or is that wishful thinking) and imposes restrictions on who can or cannot have a priestly vocation, then we begin to have a society which imposes other restrictions on its citizens. And if we accept that God IS our life and thus permeates every aspect, it becomes even more problematic. And those who cling to a literal translation of Paul's work have to execute huge acrobatic leaps and tumbles to accept women in all areas of life **except** a few areas of the church.

And why does this matter? Surely there are more important issues – people not knowing **anything** about the gospel, the state of the planet, increasing far right incursions around the world, the spectre of war. Well, it matters because of how

we see each other. Male and female we are created. If Jesus is ‘fully human, fully divine’ then that takes in both male and female. You can’t leave half of us out and be authentically **in** Christ. Together (all areas of the gender spectrum) we make a beautiful whole. We feed each other, through work, pray, study and love. It cannot happen with one section of humanity.

And I am annoyed with Paul this morning. He may say he is being poured out as a libation, that he has fought the good fight and finished the race. We have not. We are still in the race. I do believe we have the strength of God with us and that our role to proclaim the gospel is strong and undaunted.

We all have influences that have led us closer to the God who loved us into being. I was led down many paths until I washed up here, on St James’ loving and stimulating shore and was mentored by so many. Women and men. This needs to be true everywhere.

We need to search for opportunities for mutual growth rather than exclusion, understanding rather than muffled theology, building the kingdom of God rather than destroying hopes and visions, for if one of us is diminished then we are all diminished and the kingdom is that little bit further away.

I don’t have answers as to how we open the minds of those who cannot (or will not) see the beauty, the fullness of faith of having all of us teach, prophesy and lead in whatever manner we are called. It is easy to become disheartened or doubt. We are struggling for equality not only in Sydney but also in Bathurst Diocese where the situation has become one of quiet desperation as women leave and are not replaced. I do know that where there is injustice we have a mandate (Luke’s gospel 18.1-14 last week- the unjust judge and the widow) to right it. I also know

Jesus said, 'The truth will set you free' and that is not possible with only half of us. Amen.