

Genesis 15.1-12,17-18; Philippians 3.17-4.1; Luke 13.31-35

This week marks the twenty fifth anniversary of the ordination of women to the priesthood. The first ordinations took place in the Diocese of Bristol and many others soon followed, including Sheffield. Bridget, our celebrant for today was part of that first cohort and celebrates her silver jubilee today.

Looking back now it seems hard to imagine a world where women were unable to answer God's call to priesthood. So much has changed in the past twenty five years. But we should not underestimate the challenges that women faced in seeking to exercise ministry in God's church. Many had waited years as deaconesses and then deacons before they were able to offer God's forgiveness and blessing and celebrate the Eucharist. Today we give thanks for the persistence of those first women. Who were faithful to God's call in spite of hostility and the inertia of the institution.

Persistence seems to have been one of the themes of the last few weeks. Whatever our views on Brexit we have to admire the dogged determination of the Prime Minister. But persistence is not only a female virtue. The Bible has some fairly persistent men in it. In the Book of Genesis God promised Abram that he would be the father of a great nation.

He was getting on in years and there was no sign that he would become a father, let alone a great patriarch. God's promises seemed to make no sense and Abram questioned them. But God told him to look up at the heavens and count the stars and promised Abram that his offspring would be equally numerous. And amazingly, Abram believed him. He carried on hoping when hope seemed futile. Ridiculous even. When even his wife Sarai began to doubt him.

St Paul is another example of persistence. Enduring imprisonment, floggings, shipwrecks, sleepless nights and hunger in the service of the Gospel. As a former persecutor of the church he was doubted by many. And yet he persisted, keeping faith with God's call on the road to Damascus. The church needs people who have that same dogged determination. That same faithfulness to God and his call on their lives. As St Paul reminds us, we need to stand firm in the Lord.

Jesus of course is the supreme example of faithful persistence. In our Gospel today, Jesus is gradually making his way towards Jerusalem. And the Pharisees come to warn him that King Herod wants to kill him. It may be that some Pharisees were well disposed towards Jesus. But what seems more likely that they saw him as a threat and were keen to keep him away from the Temple.

In any case, Jesus ignores their warning. He has work to do and must continue to Jerusalem. Jerusalem has two sides to it. On the one hand it is God's footstool on earth. A place of encounter and profound holiness. On the other hand, Jerusalem is also a very worldly place. Brim full of politics and violence. Though it is called the city of peace, Jerusalem has hardly ever known real peace. It is a place of intrigue and division. It is a city that kills its prophets and stones those who are sent to it. Jesus knows all this. He knows that one minute its people will be shouting "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." And the next minute they will be baying for his blood. And yet he continues onwards to his fate. He remains faithful to his calling even though it will cost him his life.

Not only is Jesus faithful and persistent. He is also deeply compassionate. Though he knows that this great city will destroy him he has deep compassion for it. He longs to gather her children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings but Jerusalem was not willing. It is significant that Jesus calls Herod a fox. In confrontations between hens and foxes, hens rarely come off well. Jesus hints at the role that Herod will play in his destruction.

But that image of the mother hen is significant for us for another reason. When I was at theological college, longing and waiting for the Church of England to get on with ordaining women to the priesthood, that image of the mother hen was very important. We struggled to find feminine images of God in the Bible and the Christians tradition to balance so much that is patriarchal. Today those images are still important but thankfully we don't need to put the same emphasis on them that we did then. Having women priests serving alongside men gives a richer and more balanced picture of God. It allows the church to serve a society which

has no time for gender inequality. Today we are less bound by ideas of what is traditionally male or traditionally female. Language, which is constantly changing, has become more gender neutral in the past twenty five years, so that men are no longer normative in much of our liturgy. The last twenty five years have brought a new freedom and breadth to the life of our church.

That doesn't mean however that we can be complacent. As we know, there are still churches where the ministry of women is not accepted. Where women and girls will not see themselves represented at the altar or in the pulpit. The recent controversy over the appointment of Bishop North was a reminder that there is still a lot of work to do. While there are increasing numbers of women in the priesthood, a disproportionate number are self-supporting. It is a great joy that we now have women bishops but women are still under-represented in senior appointments. In this Diocese we have no senior women clergy. We need to get to the point where we don't talk about women priests as something special. We need to be able to just talk about priests. Male and female. Black and white. Gay and straight. Able and disabled. All of them made in the image and likeness of God. All of them able to serve his people.

I think I have probably done enough mansplaining for now. But before I sit down I do want to encourage you to be both compassionate and persistent. Try to be compassionate as Jesus was compassionate. Even towards those who oppose you. Those you struggle to love. But do not be diverted from what you know you must do. Whatever God has called you to be and do, stand firm in the Lord. Do not be put off by others. Do not waver in adversity. Do not be fearful. God is faithful and he will journey with you. Amen.