

Sermon for the Silver Jubilee Eucharist to celebrate the Women ordained priest in the Diocese of Blackburn on the Feast of St Matthias 1994

Kathleen Allen

Frances Edwards (deceased)

Dorothy Hankey

Brenda Harding

Janet Heil

Patricia Impey

Margaret Jenkinson

Elizabeth Jordan

Brenda Parkinson

Sr Mary Josephine Thomas

Jessica Turner

Rachel Watts (née Simper)

Ann Wood

Readings:

Isaiah 22.15-25 – Rev Margaret Jenkinson

Acts 1.15-26 – Rev Patricia Impey

John 15.9-17 – Rev Ann Wood (Deacon)

Many congratulations to our pioneering cohort of women on the Silver Jubilee of your ordination as priest in the Diocese of Blackburn.

I am deeply grateful to you for pioneering the way ahead. I have a sense of standing in succession to you today. I honour you. And I thank you. I celebrate you. And today we celebrate all those who have followed in your wake.

I realise there was a joke at the time about your ordinations happening on the Feast of St Matthias. It's easy to portray Matthias as the man who was the "spare part" – the apostle who had every right to claim "imposter syndrome" as he joined the ranks of the 11 who had been chosen in person by Jesus while he was still with them.

But no. I want to put this myth to rest. In fact, I want to turn this on its head. Peter, the rock on which Jesus built his church, was clear that this was God's guidance. The first instruction from Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father. "Lord, you know everyone's heart... show us which of these two you have chosen". Matthias was no imposter – he had been with Jesus all along; a witness to his resurrection. On his feast day we remember how he was chosen, he was called out of the shadows to take his place as an apostle.

The word I want to say over you today is “CHOSEN”. “I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last” (John 15). And rest assured – you have borne much fruit. It was a holy moment this afternoon on our retreat [Celebrating Women’s Voices and Vocations] as you shared your stories at Whalley Abbey of God calling you. Often as young girls. Dorothy waited 25 years as a deaconess. Jill shared how just minutes after the vote had gone through in 1994, the local Catholic priest posted a card through her door.

I am thankful to God that he chose you. And rest assured – you have borne much fruit that will last. He knows your hearts and he knows it wasn’t always easy. As we are in one of the four Dioceses which voted against the ordination of women, I am conscious that you bore more pain than perhaps others elsewhere. And for that I apologise and, as bishop in this Diocese, I repent. I sense a deep pain in the heart of God, when voices are muzzled and vocations are crushed. Whether that’s male or female, young or old, lay or ordained

One of my colleagues and good friends from St Mellitus has a small wooden cross that she puts on the table when she celebrates communion. There’s a story about it. She was given it by her friend Anne, who in turn inherited it from an old lady she used to visit in a care home. The old lady hadn’t spoken for 75 years until one day Anne visited and the old lady unexpectedly poured out her story.

She had been institutionalised as a teenager (around 1905 or so) for daring to believe that she was called to ordained ministry. When she was institutionalised she swore that she would remain silent until God’s calling on her life was fulfilled.

When she finished telling her story, she gave Anne this wooden cross. She died shortly afterwards. Anne then went on to be ordained as a deacon and then in turn, gave the cross to my friend Carys when she was ordained priest. Carys told me: “I had it on the altar the first time I presided and have been asked to pass it on towards the end of life/ministry to a woman in the next generation.”

So, I am thrilled that today we’re celebrating in the Cathedral with our Diocesan bishop as President the Silver Jubilee of your ordination as priests. Today celebrate with a sense of the joy of new birth – which makes us forget the labour that has brought the new life into the world.

I chose illustration of birth on purpose. I wonder if these were something of the birth-pangs so that many of us here today could follow in your slipstream, with a freedom from the start you never experienced. I had a recent conversation with episcopal colleague in the Church in Wales where, as you know, there have been heated debates on mutual flourishing [at the Governing Body this month]. He was quizzing me about why I was so positive about mutual flourishing of those who didn’t recognise my orders. You see I want to see my brothers flourish, raise new vocations, plant new churches to reach those who would not otherwise hear the

gospel in our country... In this conversation he paused thoughtfully then asked me a question which reached deep into my heart: "Has anyone ever said no to you?"

I realised this put me in a completely different generation. He was spot on. I've never had the experience of someone saying "No" to my vocation – not as a deacon, a priest nor as a bishop. For that I am deeply grateful.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus told his disciples: "I have called you friends". I wonder if the closer we are to Jesus, the more he invites us to share in his sufferings.

Thank you for sharing in His sufferings, thank you for your obedience to his call. Thank you for taking the authority He has given you. But I want to note what incredible resurrection life is breaking through because women are coming out of the shadows in our church and our society.

It seems to me that women have incredible influence of women on *culture* from cradle to grave. Often attentive to nuances of relationships, often attentive to the early warning signals of the Spirit of God.

My breath was caught by throwaway line in a talk given by Pete Grieg, founder of 24-7 movement, a couple of years ago. As he finished he did I kind of altar call, and said this: "women have led the way in prayer but we need young men too". This is the first time I've ever heard men in the church being encouraged into a role traditionally taken by women. I've heard lots of encouragements the other way round – women church leaders, women bishops.... It caught my breath because.... It was a glimpse that for generations, women have been ahead and on to the very thing that will usher in the Kingdom of God. The Gospels are full of this – Mary's courageous yes to the angel Gabriel; the women who stayed at cross; on Easter Sunday, Peter found empty tomb then went home and back to work. Mary Magdalene *stayed* at the tomb, she stayed in the pain, and that's when she saw the angels and met Jesus face to face.

So, I say to all men here, all women here, whether you're in the first year of the Cathedral Girls' Choir, or well into your nineties: come out of the shadows, take your place, take your seat, take up space! Be-unmuzzled. Find your voice. Be all the colours he has given you.

On a personal note, I am deeply grateful to Bp Julian, Bp Philip and colleagues here in Lancashire. For the first time in many years, because of their encouragement, I find I can be *truly myself* in this role. And this is a very great gift. It is very freeing. Catherine of Sienna, one of my favourite mystics, said this: "Be who God called you to be, and you will set the world on fire".

To finish, as I was driving here this evening from the retreat at Whalley Abbey, I was struck by an image of how you original pioneers were given bunches of golden keys, which you have been passing down and in turn unlocking others.

From our OT reading: "I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts, no one can open" (Isaiah 22.22).

Jesus is here. He is placing keys into your hands. He offers these to everyone. He will show you how to use them. For some of you, it will take a combination lock, for some of you the keys will unlock doors that have been locked tight shut for so many

years you have forgotten they existed. Or perhaps you have barred them with fear. Jesus says: Do not be afraid. There are beautiful colours, shining treasure, hidden away. Take the keys He offers you. Use them. You will be astonished how much glory they unlock for Him. And as you use them you will find your hands filled with more keys that will in turn unlock many other brothers and sisters, beloved friends with precious treasures who have so many gifts to share at His banqueting table, His party where everyone is invited, gifts to usher in His kingdom on earth in Lancashire, as it is in heaven. Amen.

+Jill Lancaster, 14th May 2019