

The Sermon at St Bene't's on Sunday 1st July 2018
Trinity 5 (Ordination Sunday)

Sermon by the Reverend Canon Richard Ames-Lewis

“Do not fear: only believe” Mark 5.21-43

Today is ordination Sunday in nearly every diocese in the country. In cathedrals up and down the land, deacons are having hands laid upon them. Anna, our vicar, as diocesan director of ordinands, is in Ely cathedral this morning.

Meanwhile, here in this church this evening, we shall have the First Eucharist of Zack our curate, newly ordained priest. Zack, having completed his diaconal year, has now received authority for the office and work of a priest in the church of God, and this he will exercise this evening.

But here this morning it is an ordinary Sunday, simply the fifth Sunday after Trinity. It is my privilege to preside and preach. But since tomorrow, 2nd July, is the fortieth anniversary of my ordination as deacon, the ordinations this morning have special meaning for me. So while I am not going to ignore the reading we have just heard, I am not going to ignore the ordinations either.

Our Gospel reading takes us into the heart of Jesus's ministry. As described by St Mark, it is a ministry at speed, as Jesus moves rapidly from one incident to the next. And today's reading is an example of two incidents contracted into one, the so-called “Markan sandwich.” There's the healing of a woman, and the raising of a girl. By interleaving the two stories, Mark increases the narrative tension and gets one story to play off against the other.

So, Jesus gets out of the boat and a great crowd surrounds him there by the lake. Jairus, one of the synagogue leaders, beseeches Jesus to come and lay hands on his dying daughter, that she might be made well and live. So Jesus goes with him.

As he goes, the crowd follows him and presses in on him. And in the crowd is a woman who has been suffering haemorrhages for 12 years. She pushes her way through the crowd, thinking to herself “If I can only but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” She touches the hem of his garment and is instantly healed.

Jesus feels power go from him and asks “Who touched my clothes?” The woman, knowing what has happened to her, comes in fear and trembling, kneels before Jesus and tells him her whole story. I love the way that the healing releases her. She can confess to him everything that has happened to her, as though the staunching of the flow of blood opens the flow of memory, unlocks her tongue and allows sorrow as well as sickness to be eased. Jesus says “Your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed.” There's been a turnaround in her, and not just in her physical health: where there was fear and trembling, now there is faith.

Meanwhile, Jairus has been kept waiting. The tension has been building. His darling daughter, we learn, has now died. People have come to bring the news, “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?” But Jesus says “Do not fear, only believe.” He is challenging Jairus to make the same turnaround from fear to faith. The house is surrounded by a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. Jesus says “Why do you weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.” And they laugh at him. Then he goes in, with her father and mother, and with Peter James and John, to her bedside. It's a beautifully domestic scene, mother and father and Jesus with his closest disciples. You can imagine them gathering around her bed, knowing not whether to weep or to hope. Jesus takes her by the hand and says “Little girl, get up!” Immediately she does just that. She gets up and begins to walk about. And as if to demonstrate the reality of her new life, he tells them to give her something to eat.

Both these miracles, one of healing, one of raising from the dead, go beyond the bounds of natural science. But the point of the stories is not the credibility of the miracles or the amazement with which they are greeted. The point of

the stories, in fact, is not the physical miracles. The point is the encounter with Jesus. The miracles are, if you like, the by-product of meeting the Lord. So, to the woman in the crowd Jesus says “Your faith has saved you”; to Jairus he says “Do not fear, only believe”.

This transformation from fear to faith is no less than the beginning of a new life. It marks also the beginning of their calling. As we see throughout the gospel stories, when your encounter Jesus you have to follow him. This is the real miracle. That meeting Jesus should so confront you with yourself, should so open you to the possibility that you are loved and lovable, that you leave all to follow him.

Encountering Jesus can happen in various ways – by risking ourselves in the adventure of prayer, by reading the scriptural accounts of his ministry; but I think you most likely encounter Jesus in another person, perhaps someone out on the edge who challenges your assumptions and opens your eyes to see in a new way what it is to be human.

Here we have the connection with today’s great events in our cathedrals. The men and women being ordained today have encountered our Lord Jesus. As a result of this, to each he has issued a loving call which they have found irresistible. This call has been tested by the Church and refined in their training.

So we pray today for those who have shared our life in this place as part of their formation: for Zack, ordained priest yesterday; Philip Murray in Durham Cathedral, Angela Rayner in Norwich Cathedral, and we pray also for the 450 others also being ordained deacon today.

They need our prayers. For the encounter with Jesus which they first experienced is not once and for all. It has to be continually renewed in their prayer lives, by their studies and by their being immersed in the pastoral care of souls in their parishes. Being ordained is a supreme privilege, and the service of ordination, happening even at this moment, is a huge affirmation of their calling. As the bishop lays hands on each of those to be made deacon, he says the words

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

And there’s a wonderful moment at the end of the service when each deacon is presented with a copy of the Holy Bible with the words

Receive this book, as a sign of the authority given you this day
to speak God’s word to his people.
Build them up in his truth
and serve them in his name.

So the miracle of encounter with Jesus Christ is formed within the Church into another miracle, the miracle of ordination. Like any other sacrament of the church, the Lord takes something ordinary, in this case an ordinary human being full of fears and contradictions, and transforms it into something extraordinary, a leader in his church. And Jesus’s words are for us and for the new deacons, as they were for those he met long ago “Do not fear; only believe.”