

The Gift of Ministry

2 Corinthians 3:17-4:13

Luke 22:24-30

Chrism Eucharist Wells Cathedral

31.03.26 10am

My brothers and sisters, I have a confession to make. Until I was ordained I'd never heard of a Chrism Eucharist, and I wasn't initially sure what to make of it. But it has fast become a highlight of my year. It's so encouraging to be able to gather with our fellow ministers, to focus once more on our core calling, and to be reminded that we're part of something much bigger than our own local context.

It's so encouraging, at this pivotal moment in our church's year, to be able to pledge ourselves once more to continue as servants of Christ in ministry, as we remember the extent to which he served us in going to the cross.

And it's a marvellous opportunity for us as your bishops and archdeacons to say thank you. Thank you for all that you do in the name of Christ in your parishes, chaplaincies, schools, and here in the cathedral. Thank you for the way you faithfully share the good news of Jesus Christ in words, in acts of service, and in the sacraments. We are so very grateful for all that you do, day by day.

Because the work to which we have all been called is complex and, as St Paul reminds us in the reading from 2 Corinthians, often costly.

So to gather together and to be reminded what ministry really is, who has called us, and how we are to exercise our ministry, is a gift.

More than that, our ministry itself is a gift. Look with me at our reading from 2 Corinthians, where Paul writes that we have this ministry through God's mercy. Being called to know God, being called to love God, being called to serve God in ministry are all acts of God's mercy. Were it not for the mercy and kindness God has given us, we wouldn't know him, and we wouldn't be serving him. So we're called to be thankful in and for our ministry. It's a gift. Sometimes it feels like a heavy gift, but it's a gift nonetheless.

Don't we know that? When we walk alongside people and speak words of hope, and life, and joy to them. When we weep with them, entering into their struggles. When we see God at working changing their lives completely as they put their trust in Christ. What a gift! Let's be ministers who are thankful, thankful for God's mercy and kindness in giving us our ministries.

Thankfulness may be the foundation, but we need to build on that foundation with faithfulness. Faithfulness in the ordinary and the everyday. In the struggles, which are real.

My experience of ordained ministry has largely been among parishes and schools, and I know from personal experience that parochial work is often hidden, lonely, and complex. Those ministering in parishes, be they Churchwardens, lay ministers, or clergy, have to switch gears in a moment from, for example, comforting a family broken by the death of a precious loved one, to organising the service rotas for three months, to dealing with someone asking about a wedding, talking to an angry bereaved husband who can't have the headstone he wants for his late wife and appealing to the Archdeacon to step in, writing a sermon, chairing a difficult PCC meeting, leading an act of

collective worship for a group of 5-11-year-olds (sometimes while dressed as a piece of fruit if it's near Christmas), praying in private for the needs of their parishes, receiving a disclosure of current or non-recent abuse from a victim or a perpetrator, leading a wedding, responding to a complaint, writing a funding application for a new mission initiative, training new leaders, leading an Alpha/Pilgrim/Christianity Explored/other nurture course, explaining to members of the congregation why they really do have to renew their safeguarding training, and answering emails - some of which are routine, and others of which tell them in unvarnished terms exactly how useless they are because they forgot to say hello with sufficient warmth when they saw a parishioner in Tesco, and their predecessor as Churchwarden, Reader, or Vicar would never have done such a thing, and the upset person will be writing to the Bishop to ask for their removal.

Nor does that even begin to unpack the complexity or the skills, gifts, and character it needs to do this across three, six, or nine parishes.

All of that is sharing the gospel in word, deed, and sacrament. It's our core work. It's what people, if asked, want us to do. And it's the work of the Kingdom, that starts from a tiny mustard seed and grows to support life in all its fullness. It's ministry that is thankful, and faithful.

We're not called to be successful. But we are called to be faithful. Faithful in the challenges that may often make us feel hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down.

There are many challenges, of course there are. We are those called into leadership in turbulent times. We're those called into leadership at a time when we know what the Church used to be, and we think we know what the Church needs to be in 25 years' time, but we're the ones in the middle, with the task of prayerfully and sometimes painfully discerning how to get from here to there, what has to die, what has to adapt, what has to start, and how to handle all the complexity of managing and holding the practical, spiritual, and emotional realities of such seismic change. That's complex, challenging, and exciting.

Because we're ministers of the gospel, whether we're churchwardens, lay ministers, deacons, priests, or bishops, we rightly think theologically about such things. We don't lose heart. We are hard pressed, but not crushed. We are perplexed, but not in despair, we are persecuted, but not abandoned, we are struck down but not destroyed. We are clay. But we are beloved clay, held in the hands of our loving Lord. Knowing that, we can be thankful, and we can be faithful.

We don't need to strive for so-called greatness. We can serve those whom no-one else sees. We can put aside the world's way of exercising authority and follow the example of our Lord, taking the lower place, knowing that all he asks of us is that we are faithful.

But we can also be hopeful, because we know the one who has called us and given us these ministries.

We can be hopeful because we know that the Church and the world have lived through times like this before, and will do so again. We know that Christ has promised to build his Church, and nothing will prevail against it. We don't hold out false hope and platitudes, but we do dig deep into the Scriptures and tradition to find timeless wisdom for turbulent times, we do hold out real hope, and we get down on our knees, we pray, and then we get back up off our knees and we get on with the work to which God has called us in our schools, our chaplaincies, our parishes, and our cathedral, faithful to our calling and rejoicing that we have been given the gift of serving under

Christ and alongside one another in the schools, churches, chaplaincies, and cathedral that, together, make up the Diocese of Bath & Wells.

So thank you for being part of that great work. Thank you for being willing to be among our communities as those who serve.

And let's all pray for one another, that we would be ministers who are thankful, faithful, and hopeful. And as we all do so, may God continue to make his light shine in our hearts to give us, and all those among whom we serve, the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

*The Rt Rev'd Fiona Gibson
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