

28th June 2015 First presiding at the Eucharist

Genesis 18:1-5, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, John 15: 9-17

Yesterday afternoon was truly wonderful. I was ordained as a Priest and here I am celebrating my first Eucharist with you, in this beautiful and sacred place. Thanks for those that ventured to Worcester yesterday and double thanks for coming along to be with me today!

It has been a joy and a blessing to both myself and my family to have been serving with you across the Wychebrook Group of churches, especially the churches of the United Parish , Bradley Green and here in Feckenham over my diaconate year. Firstly, I would like to thank Alison for all her help, support and sermon critiques. And just being with me over this journey, often into the bewildering nature of the Church of England - and being so understanding of the impact on time and family life that ministry – and my untidiness – causes. It was our wedding anniversary yesterday too! Thanks also to the girls - that have put up with my Family Services activities and have not rebelled too much over the number of times they have

had to come to church - or the cathedral, although it seems to be a good excuse for a new outfit, handbag, shoes.....

Thanks also to Wyn and Angela, and all the Church wardens and worship leaders across the parishes for making me so welcome, providing encouragement, sermon feedback or just adjusting my stole when it looked untidy. I might not need you for that now.... But where are the purificators.....

Being back in Feckenham for this first communion as your priest is both humbling and exciting. This was the church where my ministerial journey really gathered pace. As it has done also for Sue Barrett and Barbara Wheatley - there must be something in the Holy water to generate three Vicars over the last 7 years.

Who could believe it that when Alison and I visited this church 12 years ago, whilst house hunting, that I would be preaching to you today - ordained as a priest - and serving in this and a wider community around the Radio Towers, The Shack, The Village Shop, Feckenham school

and nursery and Feckenham Odeon and Webbs Garden Centre. Some of you might be surprised at that fact - not least me sometimes. But as I always say – if you want to make God laugh - tell him your plans!

Time is an interesting concept as you mature in years. Time seems to pass so quickly. Three years of discernment followed by three years of academic theological training passed really quickly. Preparing for my first funeral and baptism, separately, seemed to take an eternity. Sitting with a dying man in Stoke Prior felt humbling and not time consuming at all...

But there is something to be said about being chosen, about being picked up, about being called by our name that I want to explore with you this morning.

When I was in secondary school in Welwyn Garden City in Hertfordshire, I was not good in sports, like not good at all. Thankfully this does not appear to have been a trait passed on to my daughters - you should see them (and their mum) RUN. Even Stan The Dog is better than me!

Back to our school days- I do not know how it worked in your context, but in mine when it was time to play a game of something, the teacher designated two captains and each called alternately someone to join their team.

Usually I was among the last ones to be chosen – with my friends Nick & Neil. When my friend and neighbour in our street Nigel Pankhurst was a captain, I never knew if he selected me out of friendship, pity, or absence of other serious alternatives.

I was that bad. I even played sand castles in the long jump pit. So-called friends shouted “Take Cover” when I threw the javelin. I was always in the outfield - out of the way.

Nevertheless, each time I waited with anticipation for the moment I would hear my name being called. I wanted to be part of a team. I wanted to belong to a group.

In the passage we just heard a few minutes ago Jesus says, “You did not choose me but I chose you”.

In the very long speech recorded in the Gospel according to John that occurs between the Last Supper and his

arrest, Jesus wanted to make it clear that, whatever they may have thought, the disciples did not really decide to follow him.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus always initiates the call.

He tells the disciples that they were selected to join his group, his team- his movement-that would be eventually known as the Christian Church. Like the popular hymn says, I have called you by your name, you are mine.

Jesus chooses people and not the other way around. That is why I am here today. This fact is challenging because we like to believe that we have some sort of control over many aspects of our lives.

And there I was thinking I might be in the RAF, but had a good career in the NHS. Meanwhile I was being called for something far more special.

Take note - again - if you want to make God laugh - tell him your plans!

How does being called or chosen affect our relationship with the Church? Most of us see joining a church community as something we choose, much as we shop for other needs in our lives. Is it a must have staple or a luxury good? There are so many churches to choose from - or no church at all.

But if we still stick with the notion of church for a moment, who chooses which service or services they will attend? A BCP Communion at 8am, a Messy Church. PowerPoint or Prayer Book? Café Church where we feel the energy or the quiet serenity of just sitting in an empty, quiet church for night prayer. Is it “happy clappy”, bells and smells, robed or civvies, priest or lay led. Which expression of church fills our needs - would satisfy our desires – calls us?

Is it right that we should want to make sure our needs will be met before we commit. But what if circumstances change, do we tend to walk away without commitment or hang in there. Do we care what happens elsewhere in the church, who cleans it, the role of the PCC? The need for a Church Warden?

From the beginning we already belong to something greater than ourselves. We are part of a team called the Communion of Saints which encompasses all the believers of the past, present and even future.

We did not have to accept Jesus as our Lord and personal saviour to be redeemed. He is there for us if we like it or not - he is with us in the good times and the bad.

From the first moments, God loved us and Jesus the Christ called us to make this world a better place. That is the good news of the gospel.

We belong to our churches not just to fill our needs but to create time and spaces so that friendship, justice, caring for one another and renewal can flourish. We make His Kingdom here with us now. We need to own and share the good news of the gospel as it is relevant today.

I know. All of this is beautiful in theory, but in the real life it's not always easy.

Congregations are like families. The disagreeable auntie, the attention seeking nephew , the organiser, She or he who must be obeyed, the quiet ones. The Mother in law!! From a church perspective, let's be honest- if we can get along with many in our congregations, others really drive us crazy. The service only lasts an hour.....

On certain church and ministry related topics, I know exactly what we should do and how we should behave. This might be getting too much into Management speak for Wyn, but it is clear to me after working for 25 years in the NHS and more recently across a range of churches across a range of settings that it is more difficult to reach a consensus when we belong to a larger group.

Probably, the only way to function is to follow the model established by Jesus and his disciples: loving one another.

We have to make the choice to love one another. Notice here, we do not *have to or ought to* love one another. We are not *ordered* to love one another. The continuance of

the work of the Jesus and his disciples depends on our decision to *radically love* others as God loves us.

Loving *radically one another* does not mean that anything goes. On some occasions we chose to accept one another as we truly are. We might chose to challenge one another.

This radical love Jesus taught us sometimes calls us to tell someone, “Sorry, but I disagree with you” or “I will intervene in your life because you need to hear this”.

This radical love moves us to tell our elected officials that some laws are wrong, to say enough when the rights of others less fortunate or able are violated or when the 1% gets richer at the expenses of the poorer of our world.

This radical love also inspires us to drive extra miles to get someone to his or her medical appointment, to clear out our wardrobes and donate to the Sally Army or add goods to our actual or virtual shopping basket to give to Redditch Food Bank; to pray for people who are struggling, or

simply be open to the ways we can use the gifts that God has given us.

We have been chosen, not because we are beautiful, smart or the best in everything. Look at me. We should not believe we could boast about our status or think we are Holier than Thou. Again - look at me.

Jesus chose or is calling us despite all our imperfections and he offers us the strength and the courage to love one another so we can try to make the little corner of the world we live in a better place for all.

The more I think about it, the more I am glad that I was chosen and called by my name to belong to such a team. And I look forward to continue serving you in the best way that I can, In His Name

Amen.