

Sermon at the Diocesan Eucharist on Maundy Thursday

with the Renewal of Reader and Ordination Commitments and the Blessing of the Holy Oils

readings: [1 Samuel 16 v 1-13a](#), [St Luke 22 v 24-30](#)

28 March 2024

The unlikely, the not likely and the definitely not!

The story of the anointing of David, the forgotten one, who is tending the family sheep out in the fields is rather romantic and even intimate. At least it feels like that if you are not one of David's seven rejected brothers! Nor if you're Saul abandoned by Samuel.

It's one of the classic texts of the Old Testament and it's the second act in the creation of the Israelite kingdom, after the first act from the call of Abraham to the time of Judges. It's the story of God's Anointed who oversees the emergence of the new state that will endure up until the exile to Babylon.

It's a story that is told in several ways in our scriptures and beyond. Some of you may have read Michael Arditti's novel, *The Anointed*. It's the story of King David told by three of his wives – Princess Michal the daughter of Saul, Abigail a wealthy widow, and Bathsheba the widow of Uriah the Hittite killed by design in battle.

The reader listens to David's story told through women's voices. Revealed is the dark side of David's character – the oppression of his wives, his complicity in murder, his distorted ambition, his adultery. It reminds us that the inherited narrative of David the hero was carefully crafted to hold the Israelite kingdom together. A more plausible narrative suggests not only was David an unlikely candidate for anointing as a young man, but in his unsatisfactory, flawed, dissipated humanity of his mature years, he would definitely not have made the cut as a candidate for ethical leadership in the public realm.

Today, Maundy Thursday, we are invited, lay, and ordained together, to renew our commitment to the church's ministry. We do so as the baptised. We are those who through water, have been united to Christ and who now belong not only to God but to each other. We remind ourselves today that we share in the baptism of Jesus and therefore in his death and resurrection. A Martin Luther said – we are baptised. We die and rise with Christ each day. In baptism is found the wellspring of our faith, the energy for God's kingdom, the foundation for ministry, the gift of the Spirit who anoints us in our flawed humanity for the purposes of God.

In baptism Jesus is anointed prophet, priest and king fulfilling the great offices of Israel's common life. As we follow Jesus into baptism, so we also are called to play our part in enabling the prophetic, priestly, and royal ministry of the church. The blessing of Chrism oil today provides the clue: in our anointing at baptism 'we share in the royal priesthood of the new covenant and make known the kingdom'.

The church's ministry is royal because we share in the rule of God's kingdom; not by aiming to exercise authority but by accepting responsibility for living out kingdom values – through the cure of souls as we serve our local contexts; in our commitment to challenge injustice; by taking steps towards carbon net zero. As lay and ordained we are called to share in decision-making within the church and in society, and this means forging partnerships with all who are allies of God kingdom, with those of different faiths or no religious affiliation.

In our society where we can sometimes feel the church is marginalised and we have no automatic right to exercise authority, baptismal kingship gives us a different starting point: the service of others beginning with exercising our responsibilities and entering into partnership.

The Church's ministry is priestly because our calling is to mediate God's love, to demonstrate God's love to those amongst whom we live and work. This is costly. In parish ministry I recall one summer. I was about to go on holiday, and I wasn't sure whether I could return. Our vision for working with children, young people and their families had been sabotaged by a section of the community. As a parish community we were drained, we had loved so hard, but it hadn't worked; we were at the end of our resources, we were on our knees and broken.

Yet we needed to learn more about how God works. We discovered later that autumn that God was in our disorientation and despair. Gradually out of nothing came resources, partnership, expertise, and support. Gradually a new form of church emerged that lives on today by God's grace.

Our failures create a space for God to bring to birth something new. As we looked back, we saw with God's grace a pattern, a new grain in God's work that we had not seen before. As we offer love, we offer ourselves, we are the raw material of God's kingdom.

The Church's ministry is prophetic because we are to make known God's kingdom. But in a post-secular society prophecy look quite different. It's about the power of listening before we speak. Through the power of listening, we help God's kingdom be known because we curate spaces for words of hope to be shaped, come to the surface, and communicated. In ministry our calling is to enable others' voices to be heard – the vulnerable, the weak, the poor, the young. Listening enabling others to find their voice. Prophecy takes the power dynamics of contemporary society serious. Prophecy through listening frees up and reveals perspectives on God's deep work that we might never hear otherwise. This is the making known of God's kingdom. The prophetic work of today.

And it's the sacraments that enable the prophetic ministry of the royal priesthood. Today we have olive oil in abundance. Olive oil speaks of preparation for the struggle of discipleship, of wholeness, health, and healing. Oils carry us through our spiritual journey – in preparation for baptism; in all those ways in which we receive God's anointing, not least in confirmation; a visible sign of God's love in our weakness and eventually our death.

In water, in bread and wine, in oil, God's Spirit seizes a particularity of creation and makes it resonate with God's love, a sign to us of the new heaven and the new earth for which we long and which God is creating moment by moment.

The vision of God's transformed creation in the eucharist inspires us to live out baptism in whichever ministry God has appointed us – the parish safeguarding officer, the churchwarden, the ordained deacon, those with episcopal oversight, the Reader, the ordained priest, the person who attends worship and prays quietly, the musician – each of us offering our unique contribution into the rich mix of the royal priesthood, making known the kingdom of God to all. Each of us held with equal regard by God who redeems our flawed and imperfect humanity.

This is what we celebrate together in the eucharist. And it's not far away from what Jesus was thinking as he presided over the Last Supper. In St Luke's Gospel Jesus commissions his disciples for their future ministry. 'I confer on you', he says 'my kingdom so that you may feast together and together, as royalty, take responsibility, by serving others, ushering in the same kingdom, that was conferred on me'. The deep down idea is covenant. God in Jesus pours out his unconditional love on his broken people, so that we might freely respond, serving the church's ministry.

The disciples' competition and squabbling for status is misguided because it undermines the very meaning of the Last Supper. They overlooked that the judge who serves is the one who takes responsibility. They didn't grasp Jesus' radical interpretation of the meaning of leadership through the roles of prophet, priest and king. They missed that bread and wine shared with the presence of God in human form gathers the royal priesthood in preparation for being commissioned to cooperate with God's work in an unsatisfactory world.

Malcolm Guite, the Anglican poet shares in this vision of sacrament and he wrote a poem for Maundy Thursday that gathers the whole of God's creation into God's purposes: He wrote:

Here is the source of every sacrament,
The all-transforming presence of the Lord,
Replenishing our every element,
Remaking us in his creative Word.
For here the earth herself gives bread and wine,
The air delights to bear his Spirit's speech,
The fire dances where the candles shine,
The waters cleanse us with His gentle touch.
And here He shows the full extent of love
To us whose love is always incomplete,
In vain we search the heavens high above,
The God of love is kneeling at our feet.
Though we betray Him, though it is the night.
He meets us here and loves us into light.²

We are the unlikely, the not likely and the definitely not! But on Maundy Thursday God in Jesus kneels in front of us as our servant. 'I am among you as one who serves', he says, as true prophet, priest and king. What is more - in bread broken and wine poured out Jesus hands himself over to us knowing that in our flawed humanity we will desert him, betray him, and play our part in putting him to death. That is what Maundy Thursday is all about. That is why we are here. God's love that reaches out to us and claims us for God's purposes.

**The Very Revd Dr Peter Robinson,
Dean of Derby.**