

20221204 – 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Women’s Ordination in Diocese of Adelaide.

St Peter’s Cathedral, Adelaide

*The Right Reverend Denise Ferguson*

*Assistant Bishop*

*Diocese of Adelaide*

Key Reading: Matthew 28:1-10

Key Verse: *V.10 Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.’*

In the name of God who is Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life. Amen.

I want to acknowledge the great privilege I feel having been invited to preach at this celebration. While I may stand here as the first woman to be consecrated assistant bishop in the Diocese of Adelaide, I acknowledge that my journey is not the journey of ordained women in the Anglican Church of Australia. However, without your journey, my appointment could not have happened. Thank you.

I offer my warm congratulations to the Reverends Joan Claring-Bould, Flo Monaghan (now Walters), Sr Juliana SI, Susanna Pain and Susan Straub who were ordained priest 30 years ago tomorrow in this Cathedral. It is wonderful to be able to celebrate with you as we look back on that journey, but also as we look to the future.

It feels most appropriate that this celebration takes place in Advent, for this is the season when we wait and prepare to celebrate God breaking into the world in a new way, with a promise to do so once again in the future. One of the central figures in that journey was, of course, John the Baptist who courageously called the people to prepare the Way of the Lord. We all know what happened to John the Baptist – he ended up with his head on a plate.

I appreciate that there were no beheadings in those early days as the Anglican Church of Australia wrestled with the concept, and then grappled with the legislation to enable women to be ordained priests. However, having read some of the testimonies of those who persisted, and learned more of the work of the Movement for the Ordination of Women, it must have felt like a full-on assault, body, mind, and spirit at times. Certainly, history records that the service here in this Cathedral on 5<sup>th</sup> December 1992 was a time both of great joy and of great tension.

Thank you, to all whose courage, tenacity, and persistence blazed the trail to ensure that the Anglican Church of Australia, or at least a significant portion of the church, now honours and values the contribution of women across all three Holy Orders.

It saddens me to acknowledge that there are still places in the Anglican Church of Australia that don’t and won’t recognize God’s call to the priesthood on women’s lives. We will continue to pray that God will work in and through these places so that they will come to recognise and value women’s priestly ministry equally with God’s call to men.

I also celebrate that the Diocese of Adelaide, at its recent Synod acknowledged the important contribution ordained women have made and continue to make to worship, ministry and leadership in the Anglican Church, and affirmed that women who are priests or bishops, teach and lead with full spiritual authority in this diocese.

May we all uphold in prayer the Diocese of the Murray, our near neighbours, as they consider ordaining women to the priesthood.

Much has been accomplished since those first voices cried out and spoke into what must have felt like the wilderness of the day. Regardless of the challenges, those voices persevered, and we stand in this place celebrating the fruit of faith and conviction, joining our voices with those from around Australia who have, this year celebrated the '92 of '92, and all the women who have subsequently been ordained as priest.

I can't speak into the personal experience of the women ordained as priest in the Anglican Church of Australia over this time, because these are not my stories to tell. However, having been ordained in a different part of the Anglican Communion, where women have been ordained into the priesthood since 1977, I have observed that there is still a long way to go before lay and ordained women's voices, gifts and ministries are accepted fully across the Anglican Church of Australia.

So, the journey continues as the voices move us from 'Prepare the Way' to 'Go and Tell'.

The reading from Matthew's gospel that I chose for this evening may seem predictable when celebrating women's call to ministry. This passage reminds us that the resurrected Christ first appeared to the two Mary's, two women who had been important to Jesus, and visibly active in supporting his ministry. Whilst this is a critical revelation, it was actually the final verse that stood out for me

*'Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'(Matt 28:10)*

**Do not be afraid, go and tell, use your voice.**

There is something powerful about 'voices', and this journey we celebrate tonight.

Thirty years ago, the Cathedral steps were lined with silent voices. Many in the church hoped and prayed those voices would remain silent, and, in some places the silence is still tangible. However, Jesus' message to the two Mary's was clear – *do not be afraid, go and tell, use your voice.*

And Jesus voice continues to ring out – *do not be afraid, go and tell.....* but what might that voice, those voices, sound like as we step into the next thirty years?

I am grateful for the wonderful conversations and email exchanges over these past months as the organising team for this service made their preparations. They have been so helpful and insightful.

In one of those exchanges Dr Janet Scarfe, National Chair of the Movement for the Ordination of Women from 1989 to 1995 (those critical years), reminded me that the task of MOW was so much greater than a quest to see women join clerical ranks. Although this wider task is often subsumed in the excitement of the celebrations.

*In her words 'That (the ordination of women to the priesthood) was the cosmetic change - the church sounded different with women's voices, looked different and as I used to say in the media even smelt different - but the quest was far more and far deeper than that. We were working for a transformation of the church, a deep cultural change that involved change in the church's language about people and God, theological change, full and equal participation of women in church structures at every level, which was almost non-existent in the 1980s. The exclusion of women from the ordained ministry was the most obvious and public aspect of that, and women's ordination was the shorthand way of talking about that exclusion, one incarnational symbol of inclusion.'*

As we know, there are still areas of the Anglican Church of Australia, and even in this diocese, where women are restricted and excluded from participation.

There is still so much more to be accomplished.

In March this year, when we gathered with the women who are bishops to celebrate this anniversary, Archbishop Kay Goldsworthy gave voice to a very real concern

*'Is it a quiet possibility that women's ordained leadership, for which we worked and fought and prayed for so long, might only be here for a season? Even though there are thousands of women across the Anglican Communion who are deacons and priests, and at least 120 women who are bishops preparing to meet at Lambeth later this year. It is unthinkable, and yet perhaps not, that women could once again be written out of the leadership of Christ's Church?*

*How is the Holy Spirit at work in this?*

*Who in the church, and in the world outside these walls, is now hearing the voice of our risen Lord speaking their name, and sending them forth?'*

Another sobering and challenging voice.

Advent is the season of prophetic voices. It was in the season of Advent that this Diocese took the prophetic, courageous, and just step to ordain Reverends Joan Claring-Bould, Flo Monaghan (now Walters), Sr Juliana, Susanna Pain, and Susan Straub, and they have paved the way for so many others to follow. The prophetic actions and voices of these first five women, and their supporters witnessed to faithfulness, courage, tenacity, and persistence as they prepared the way for approx. 900 women to be ordained priest in the Anglican Church of Australia over the past thirty years; and enabled women who were priests such as myself from other parts of the Anglican Communion to also serve here.

So maybe this celebration, while honouring the journey that has been, can be a catalyst to ignite a new generation of prophetic voices, to *'not fear, and to go and tell'* because there is still a great wilderness to be spoken into.

As we contemplate how we might use our voices for the journey ahead, may we also intentionally consider whose voices are still not being heard; remembering that the task set by MOW all those decades ago was *transformation of the church, a deep cultural change that involved change in the church's language about people and God, theological change, (as well as) full and equal participation of women in church structures at every level.*

There is still so much more to be accomplished.

As I conclude, I want to add an additional tribute this evening to the Rev'd Joan Claring-Bould, who not only celebrates her thirtieth anniversary as priest tomorrow, but also celebrates her thirty fifth anniversary of ordination to the diaconate. The first women to be ordained deacon in this diocese. Who paved the way for this evening's celebration.

In doing so, I invite you to join me as I pray the prayer that was offered at the conclusion of the Movement for the Ordination of Women AGM following the Adelaide Synod Vote to ordain women to the diaconate in 1985.

*May the loving power of the Holy Spirit unite us all, women and men, in seeking God's will on our lives, and in fulfilling the purposes of all who seek Holy Orders in true servanthood and love. Amen.*