

**20240720 – Service of Thanksgiving**  
**The Right Reverend Denise Ferguson**

**Readings:**

Isaiah 6:1-8 Here I Am, Send Me  
Psalm 121 I lift up my eyes to the hills  
2 Corinthians 4:1-2,5-7 Treasure in Clay Jars  
John 21:15-19 Follow Me

Holy God, may we have wide eyes, inquiring minds and loving hearts as we seek to follow your Word and your Way. Amen.

How does one begin an ending? Standing here, in the midst of you all makes this ending much more real. I am so grateful that you have taken the time, on a cold Saturday morning, to be here.

I must admit, as I was preparing today's sermon I was reminded of a cartoon. The minister is standing in the pulpit, surrounded by packing boxes ready to leave. His opening words being *"Today's sermon is one I've wanted to preach for some time now."* But before I move on to 'those words' I want to share with you why I chose the readings we have heard – because they are not the readings for the day. I think it is called taking Episcopal licence.

I chose these readings because each one has a been significant for my ministry journey.

The passage from Isaiah reminds me of a time, many years ago when God had begun to disturb me.

It was the mid 1980's and I was an Army wife at the time, living in Waiouru, an Army Camp in the middle of nowhere in Aotearoa New Zealand. I was a cradle Anglican, always involved in church, choir, and as an Altar Server, so being active in a community of faith was part of my DNA. While I was actively involved in this particular Community of Faith, it was a personally painful time. God and I were not exactly on speaking terms as I struggled to come to terms with secondary infertility. During this time, an opportunity arose to hear about the ministry of Church Army. It was being held in the local town of Taihape.

At the conclusion of the presentation, an invitation for personal prayer was offered. After some hesitancy, I went forward. I remember to this day praying *'I don't know why I am here, Lord! This is not something I would usually do. All I know is that deep in my heart you are calling me to serve. I don't know why, how, where or when. Whatever the path, I pray that you will provide whatever is needed to fulfil this call.'*

My encounter with the Holy Spirit that night was profound, and in the words of the prophet Isaiah my response was - "Here am I, Lord. Send me." Shortly after that encounter the Army Chaplain approached me, and I was licensed as a Lay Reader.

Many years later, still not really knowing what it was God was calling me to, I found myself at Theological College (that journey is another complete sermon). During that time Mark and I had the opportunity to travel to the Holy Land, a journey that was life changing.

There were many significant God moments during that time, but one remains etched in my memory. We stopped in Tabgha, on the edge of the Sea of Galilee. The Church is named as the Place of St Peter's Primacy, the location for today's Gospel passage. As we wandered around, I found myself in a tree lined glade. In that glade was the statue that you see on the front of today's order of service. It depicts Jesus commissioning Peter to 'Feed my sheep'.

In the silence and beauty of that place the Holy Spirit touched me deeply once again and I was changed forever. I walked away knowing that I too had been called to "Feed my sheep". I had no comprehension of the outworking of that call, let alone why Jesus would be calling me. However, I knew, once again, with the deepest of conviction, that I had been called to serve.

I could never have anticipated that 27 years later I would be standing in this Cathedral, dedicated to that same St Peter, as a Bishop in the Church of God, giving thanks for the most remarkable, humbling, blessed journey.

That doesn't mean it has been easy, for me or for my family. As any clergy family knows, we all make great sacrifices to follow. But God has been faithful – even in the midst of the struggles.

That brings me to Psalm 121. This psalm reminds me of a very special woman – the Rev'd Lois Hills, who was called home to God last year. Lois was an amazing, practical, no nonsense, deeply caring, faithful priest, and wonderful Mentor. As one of the first women ordained to the priesthood in the Diocese of Wellington, she encountered some significant resistance to her ministry, as did her husband and her family. But the resistance never stopped her from faithfully following that call, or from her family supporting her.

When times were tough, and especially as she nursed her loving, supportive, faithful and caring husband through his last days, we would sit at his bedside, and read Psalm 121 together - *I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come? <sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.*

In those moments of great challenge, it has become one of my favourite psalms too.

And finally, the passage from St Paul's Second Letter to the people of Corinth. If I had to summarise my ministry, I doubt I could have found more appropriate words.

It is by God's mercy and grace, that we are called and commissioned to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ, and to do all we can to bring about the reality of God's kingdom. We do this not in our own strength but in the light and love of a faithful God. We offer this treasure out of our humanity, our frailty, our brokenness and our fragility – the clay jars that are our lives.

When I reflect upon these readings and consider my ministry journey, I am reminded of the words of that cartoon *"Today's sermon is one I've wanted to preach for some time now."*

These past five years, since I was called to be an assistant bishop in the Diocese of Adelaide have been the most privileged of my ministry. There have been moments of great joy and great sadness, and I certainly don't underestimate the challenges of ministry in today's environment – for all of us. However, have you noticed, despite a pandemic and its ongoing consequences, God has been faithful.

The face of the church may be changing, as it has done throughout history, but God remains faithful. And the call and commission to each one of us remains the same, as it has done throughout Salvation History:

Feed my sheep,  
follow me,  
do so in your full and frail humanity,  
... and I will be with you always.

And our response is still to say, boldly and courageously *'Here am I, send me!'*

The challenge, as it is in each generation, is how will we respond. Will we continue in the comfort and complacency of our lived experience of church? Or will we courageously step out and look with wide eyes, inquiring minds and loving hearts open to what God is calling us to be and do in this next season – here in South Australia, and beyond.

That is the challenge I leave you with as I step into **my** next season of life and ministry.

I could say more, but ultimately the way forward is a choice.

However, before I close there are a few more words to be shared. Whilst today I give thanks for the ministry I have been privileged to offer, this hasn't happened in isolation.

Firstly – to Mark. Thank you.

Mark, many years ago you said to me that I had followed you for fifteen years as an Army Wife, and now you would follow me in this call to serve.

Well, I think I have stretched the time limit. I am forever grateful for your love, care and support, and for your faithfulness to God's call on your life. I appreciate that I am not always easy to live with, but you have persevered, and I am so grateful.

To Cara, Tony & Bella. Thank you for gifting Dad and I the freedom to follow this call to Adelaide. We know the cost of that gift and words will never express our gratitude. We are so looking forward to being back in Brisbane with you, and with Ammie & Fin.

To the friends we have gathered along the way – you know who you are, you have stolen a piece of our hearts, and those deep and abiding friendships will go with us into the future. You have blessed us abundantly.

To Archbishop Geoff – When I answered the phone that day back in 2019, I couldn't have comprehended how the ensuing years would unfold. Serving alongside you has been one of the greatest privileges of my ministry. Your faith, wisdom, leadership and guidance has touched me deeply. Thank you.

To my episcopal colleagues, both within the diocese, the province, nationally and internationally. You are awesome. These years have been tough as we have grappled with so much change and challenge. Your faith, collegiality and friendship is priceless beyond measure.

To Joe Thorp and the Diocesan Office Team: Synod Office, St Barnabas College and the Bishop's Office teams. You beaver away, often unseen and unappreciated, carrying the tension of the institution, alongside the commitment to ministry and mission. You do so with the best interests of the diocese at heart, as you seek to fulfil God's call upon Adelaide Anglicans to Grow, Connect, Advocate and Serve. Your commitment and dedication is precious. Thank you.

To the clergy, thank you for accepting me into your midst, not only as the first bishop who is a woman in this diocese, but for your collegiality, confidence and support. Ministry is increasingly challenging, but you too remain faithful to the call to 'feed my sheep'. Please take care of yourselves.

To my ecumenical and interfaith colleagues. Thank you for sharing the journey. My world is richer for knowing you.

To all of you, the Whole People of God – you are the constant in fulfilling God's call in this place and for this generation. Thank you for your faithfulness, stewardship, and commitment as you too answer that call to follow.

May you continue to know God's blessing as you respond to the diverse face of ministry across Adelaide, now and into the future. As you do so, in hope, joy and trepidation – remember – this is God's call, God's mission and God is faithful. Do not be afraid of whatever the future holds.

And finally - Endings are always opportunities for beginnings. It is time for me to step into the next season of life, and, I have no doubt, also ministry. But like that night in Taihape all those years ago, I have no idea how this new call to follow and to serve will unfold. However, I do know it is time to be back with family.

I ask that you pray for Mark and I in this transition, as I will continue to pray for you.

Thanks be to God for all that has been and may we each step into this next season with wide eyes, inquiring minds and loving hearts as we seek to courageously and faithfully follow God's call. Amen.