

St Mary-le-Tower, Ipswich

**Sermon given by Revd Mary Sukanovic
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**Advent 2, 9th December 2012.
Philippians 1.3-11; Luke 3.1-6**

Well here we are in a new church year and a new Gospel to follow, the longest of the three synoptics, Luke. It is the gospel that right in the very beginning, before we even get as far as today's reading, contains three of our most beloved and perhaps most used extracts of scripture. These are those we use as 'Canticles' – said and sung across the globe daily in Morning and Evening Prayer: the Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis, and Benedictus. (You can find the words to these at the back of this sermon.)

All these canticles speak of the same theme, Salvation and Liberation. They set the tone for Luke's Gospel with the same theme running throughout. For Luke, in addition to preaching the message of the Kingdom, Jesus went about doing good: healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, making the deaf hear and the dumb speak, curing the cripple and cleansing the leper. He was revolutionary in many ways and didn't allow the religious and racial prejudice that was present among some Jews of the time, to hinder him from doing these things among all classes and estates of people.

Jesus gave hope and confidence to men and women alike, to outcasts and those declared religiously and ritually unclean, he gave equal attention to all who needed his help. He denounced the religious structures that aided and abetted oppression and he gave hope to all people. After his Ascension the Church became the custodian of this message of salvation and liberation and if the Church always preaches, acts and lives by this message then the Church will always remain relevant.

Not only is Luke's a Gospel of Salvation and Liberation, but it is the Gospel that more than any other affirms and proclaims the ministry and place which Jesus afforded to women. So there is a particular irony that we should come to this Gospel just at this time, just as some in the Church have done real damage to that vital message of Salvation and Liberation of which the church is the custodian, and thus has challenged its relevance for today.

For this is what I believe has been done in the failure of Synod to pass the Women Bishops measure. No, let's be clear and honest here; this is what the House of Laity of Synod has done. In ensuring the vote to establish women in the episcopate (women as bishops) was defeated and did not pass into legislation, the damage is close to irreparable in some places, and in the past couple of weeks this has begun to sink in. The failure to ensure a real equality for women in the leadership of the church, has indeed caused a very large number of people to challenge the relevance of the Church and the Gospel.

It was an outcome that, I admit, hit me very much harder than I was expecting. I can't quite explain how I felt, not just at an emotional level but the very physical feeling I experienced. So in many ways I am glad that this is my first chance to speak about the issue, as I have taken some time to understand what lies at the heart of my feelings.

What I am clear about is what it is **not** about; and that is any desire on my part whatsoever to be a bishop. I work for one (and a very good and able one, one of the best in my belief) and I see at first hand the demands that are made and know very well I don't have the skills for that. Rather, if I can find enough ability in some small way to support the ministry of one, that is all I hope for.

I do however know women who do have such gifts; I also know many men who most certainly do not! The gifting of the Holy Spirit is not about gender, and the imparting of these gifts is not only ever possible by men upon men. My word! How that outlook diminishes God and the Holy Spirit! If anyone really believes

God cannot gift and create in anyone he wishes, gifts that further his mission, there is in such a belief a shocking degree of arrogance. So that shoots down the Forward in Faith notion of an apostolic succession which can only be from man to man.

It also neatly shoots down the Conservative Evangelical argument that women cannot lead or be the head of anything over men, and that women are designed for more lowly tasks that do not (as Charles has already put so well in his statement) afford them equality of power, authority and influence. The world in which Jesus lived was every bit as much in need of the skills and perspectives of women in leadership as we are today. Luke's Gospel goes to some length to show us how Jesus affirmed these examples. What would be fascinating would be to take every account of women in that Gospel and see just how they were modelling leadership, but that's a task for another sermon.

Today our task is to ask, in the place in which the Church now finds itself, how we might reflect upon this situation in this particular time of Advent. Well, John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord, to make a straight path and proclaim the call to repentance. Yes, I do think there is a need for repentance over what has happened; because not only does the vote against women bishops say something about the Church, but it says something about how the Church, even in our apparently progressive society, sees ALL women. And this I think is at the heart of my depth of reaction. It diminishes the role and place of women in society and opens the way for continued abuse.

What does it say about the Church when it tries to proclaim liberation and when it speaks against some of the many injustices on this world? Can it truly now stand up for the women of the world who have taken to prostitution to support ageing parents, or for women who are by any real definition raped and forced to produce children with no means of meeting their needs for food and clothing; or for women who are the breadwinners working in fields to support lazy, alcoholic husbands; or for women in places where polygamy is the norm; or for women who suffer domestic abuse on a daily basis? The list could go on.

In the next sentence after the end of the reading today, John the Baptist called his listeners a 'Brood of vipers'. He is in effect telling the people that they cannot rely on their descent from Abraham to save them but must repent and live a life worthy of their descent and worthy of being children of God, modelling the real values of the Kingdom of God.

Today perhaps we need a new John the Baptist to point out that simply thinking that we inherit the Kingdom of God by faith in Jesus and his death and resurrection is not enough. We must repent as a Church and live lives that are worthy of being called Children of God. This means affording everyone, not just half the population, the rights to contribute fully and equally to society. And if the Church does not model this in its own leadership then we do truly make ourselves irrelevant.

We too need to prepare the way of the Lord, not only in our hearts and minds but as a Church. This means we must be a Church that can hold up a mirror to itself and see the reflection of what it is to be a Church worthy to proclaim that Gospel of salvation and liberation, a church where those three wonderful canticles have seeped as deeply into our way of being as they are into our memories, so that we can seek to liberate without the world seeing us as hypocrites.

So what can you do about all this? Well you can be prepared to take your part and even a lead, and no excuses please that say "I am not an activist or a leader!" A leader is one who looks at the world around them, sees a thing that needs doing, prays, prays some more, makes a plan and then puts that plan into action.

You can be ready and prepared to be more interested and engaged with the structures of the Church, to make your voices heard and to challenge the injustices that you see. The House of Laity did not represent the Church on that sad day, this is clear. But there are reasons for this. Those opposed took over places from those who were in support just because of the apathy of church members who thought there was no need to fight.

PCCs, Deanery Synods, Diocesan Synods, are all places that hold influence not only over this but over many issues in the Church. So ask this Advent, what God is wanting you to do take a part in preparing his way, so his kingdom can come into the world a little more, by being more involved in these Church structures.

Rowan Williams in an Advent reflection says that John the Baptist comes to say, *“Something is about to happen and you’ve very little idea what it is and you’ve no idea how radical and how complete a change it will involve.”* When Jesus comes into the life of the world with something unplanned, overwhelming, something that makes a colossal difference, we long for it and yet we don’t quite know what it is going to involve.

*But it’s a bit odd you might say. Surely Jesus has come into the world and by now we ought to know what difference he’s made. But the truth is we don’t yet know the difference Jesus **might** make ... if we let him... we know something of the difference he has made to our lives and the life of communities and Church, and yet there is more. We are still waiting to see what might happen if Jesus was allowed into our lives and the life of the church that bit more fully; that bit more radically!*

I believe that God is calling the Church to let women into the order of bishops in order to share their particular gifts of leadership along with their fellow male bishops. So this Advent let us pray that we as individuals might have the courage to let God be God in each of us more fully; that we might be prepared, come Christmas, to let the Christ child be born in us a bit more, a lot more; and that the Church may learn to embrace the whole human race in the way Jesus did, equally, in order that we might proclaim the Gospel with conviction and integrity – together. Amen.

Magnificat – Luke 1. 46-55

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
For he has regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden.
For behold, from this day all generations will call me blessed;
For the mighty one has done great things to me,
and holy is his name.
And his mercy is on those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts;
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones
and has exalted the holy;
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his seed forever.

Nunc Dimitis – Luke 2. 29-32

Lord, now you let your servant go in peace;
Your word has been fulfilled.
My eyes have seen the salvation
You have prepared in the sight of every people,
A light to reveal you to the nations
and the glory of your people, Israel.

Benedictus – Luke 1.68-79

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel;
 he has come to his people and set them free.
He has raised up for us a mighty saviour,
 born of the house of his servant David.
Through his holy prophets he promised of old,
that he would save us from our enemies,
 from the hands of all who hate us.
He promised to show mercy to our fathers
 and to remember his holy covenant.
This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham,
 to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
Free to worship him without fear,
 holy and righteous in his sight
 all the days of our life.
You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High,
 for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,
To give his people knowledge of salvation
 by the forgiveness of their sins.
In the tender compassion of our God
 the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
To shine on those who dwell in darkness
 and the shadow of death,
 and to guide our feet into the way of peace.