

Loving God, by your Spirit may my words point to your living Word, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I wonder if anyone here has ever experienced imposter syndrome? I will confess to a very bad case of it today. Preaching at this incredible celebration, in front of a stunning array of gifted and faithful sisters, including some of those early trailblazers to whom I and so many owe a debt that cannot be paid. I mean, what was I doing in 1994? Well, I am afraid to say that the ordination of women in the Church of England passed me by. I'm Scottish. In 1994 I was in my first year at Aberdeen University. I wanted to serve God with all that I was, but it never crossed my mind to go into the ministry as we Presbyterians called it. While the Church of Scotland had – officially – been ordaining women longer than its English counterpart, there were blessed few of them about. Instead, I decided to be a missionary and was training to be a doctor.

It was at Aberdeen that I encountered my first ordained women. One was a Baptist pastor. She once came to speak at a student group I attended. Through her I was introduced to Ignatian spirituality and had such a profound healing encounter with Jesus I remember it three decades later. Ignatian spirituality has remained an important strand in my faith ever since.

The second woman was our university chaplain whose quiet confident hospitality made college chapel an incredible place. She invited a local Episcopalian priest to preside in chapel at a Eucharist and I was so blown away by the poetry of this alien liturgy that I kept that order of service for years – a foretaste of where God would send me. And then she invited a wonderful Roman Catholic priest to preach. At the end of the service when we shared the simple Church of Scotland communion rite, we gathered round the holy table and he remained seated at the back; he could not join us. But this would not do. The chaplain ushered us all down the aisle and we shared bread and wine in a circle of fellowship around our guest. He could not partake with us, but he was one of us. For a future Coventry clergywoman, this was an early glimpse of reconciliation.

Two women, about thirty years ago, through whose ministry God gave me glimpses of the vocation to which God was calling me. Neither of them will remember my name far less have any idea of the path my life has taken. Neither of them know the gifts they gave me. And I tell these stories because it reminds us as we celebrate today of the countless gifts that the women ordained priest in our midst have given over the last 30 years. The ways in which God has used them powerfully, prophetically, creatively, courageously and sometimes subversively to make God possible for all sorts of people in all sorts of places. Often without knowing it, by their public representative ministry as well as in private pastoral wisdom, they have been the means of God drawing those God is calling nearer to God's heart.

What a gift you are! Thank you! Thank you for your faithfulness to the call God has placed on you. I wish you could see how your God rejoices over all you do for the Kingdom. Like the reading from Zephaniah, for some of you the road of your calling has taken you through times of shame, opposition and even oppression and yet God rejoices over you with singing. God honours you – and so do we today.

So you are a gift, my sisters. But it is a joy to celebrate this day not just with you, but your friends and colleagues – some of whom find themselves with different theological beliefs. Blackburn Diocese is a place where the differences we hold in our national church are made visible as ordained women minister in partnership with a Diocesan Bishop who supports them, values them deeply but cannot yet ordain them. And my question today is, in what ways might this diocese be a gift to the wider Church of England?

Well, perhaps the gift is in that very visibility. In too many places in the church, we find this attitude: “women can be priests and bishops and we have bishops to minister to those who cannot accept their ministry – job done, let’s move on.” But the job is definitely not done. If the five guiding principles are to work as they were intended, there is so much more to do to ensure that ordained women and those unable to accept their ministries can co-exist fruitfully in our church – can “conspire” as Leah said in her welcome. The question that Blackburn Diocese raises by its very existence - how can women flourish in a diocese where some cannot ordain them nor receive sacraments from their hands – is a question that the whole church would do well to ponder. Because the question that exists here is found in all sorts of ways throughout the Church of England.

And yet, your gift is more than making this question visible – it is how, in your shared life and ministry, you answer it. Speaking to Bishop Philip before coming here today, he said “it’s all about relationship”. And he is absolutely right. But what sort of relationship? Human relationships are imperfect things. As we heard in our reading from the epistle, so much of what we experience in this world is a poor reflection of what will be. Human relationships at their best show us something of God, but in being human they have their flaws. Power imbalances, politics, anxieties – all sorts of things get in the way. Paul’s advice in this reading is remarkably practical. Love is not found in high-faluting speeches, excesses of spiritual fervour or in clever theology, but in the small, thoughtful and costly decisions we make to honour one another, value one another, bless one another.

Perhaps the calling of Blackburn Diocese is not to be known for its differences but to be known for its love. Might that be your gift? In a world which is increasingly polarised, might your willingness to reach out across difference, to honour those with whom you disagree, to truly believe that the things you share are greater than the things that divide you – might that be an example our society needs?

There will be times when that reconciling love feels beyond you, either as individuals or as colleagues. There will be times when human love falls short. But we do not make these efforts in our own strength, and so we turn at last to our gospel reading and start with a woman who surpasses even the remarkable ones gathered here today.

Woman, the angels ask. Woman, Jesus enquires. There is no attempt at a gender-blindness in this encounter. The woman is Mary Magdalene, but in this address, we hear echoes of another woman, another Mary. For this is how Jesus addressed his mother, both at the beginning of his ministry at Cana and at its ending on the cross. If Mary the mother of Jesus was Jesus' first and most perfect disciple according to Pope John VI, then perhaps Mary Magdalene can be called the first disciple of the resurrected Christ.

Jesus's words themselves seem to suggest this. "Whom are you looking for?" These words echo Jesus' first words at the very beginning of John as he gathers his early followers. "What are you looking for?" he asks Andrew and the other disciple of John. But now, post-resurrection we know that we are never seeking a what – we are seeking a who. And Mary is looking for Jesus.

Is Mary a perfect disciple? Well, according to David Ford, she is the model of discipleship for in all her grief and confusion, she does the one thing needed – she seeks Jesus. And while her tears prevent her seeing him, the minute he speaks her name – Mary – she recognises his voice. We are instantly drawn back to chapter ten of John's Gospel: *He calls his own sheep by name - the sheep follow him because they know his voice.* Mary is a sheep of his flock.

Mary's response, Rabbouni, is less punchy than Thomas's confession – my Lord and my God – but it is no less theologically interesting. This word, in her mother tongue, meaning teacher is full of intimacy, yet recognises the authority of the one who in John's prologue is the Word, the one who enlightens us, the one who is close to the Father's heart and makes the Father known.

“Do not hold on to me,” Jesus tells her. Is this a rebuke to an over-emotional woman. No. No, indeed. From Mary’s Rabbouni, it is the first piece of post-resurrection teaching which this first disciple in the new creation is to learn and pass on to the others. In a few verses, Jesus will give his followers the gift of the Spirit, a new way to know him, a new way to know God that will be so much better than they ever could imagine. But they can only receive this if they let go of him as he was and welcome him afresh.

The prologue to John’s gospel begins with the words that begin the creation narrative in Genesis, and at the end of the Gospel we find a man and a woman in the garden. But unlike Adam and Eve, the sending out from that garden does not lead to separation, struggle and death – it leads to new abundant life and to new relationship. While Eve births the human family, Mary is the one Jesus sends to gather a new family of God.

This new family is only made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus. The new family is inaugurated from the cross, when Jesus turns to his mother and says “Woman” – see it turns up again – “here is your son,” and to the beloved disciple “Here is your mother”; in that moment on the cross he plants the seed of a new community, but it comes into its fullness when Jesus rises again.

“Go to my brothers” he says. Jesus has never called his disciples brothers before. In John’s Gospel, the word has only been used for his human relatives – usually when they were getting things wrong. Jesus’ followers have been disciples, on that last evening before his arrest, he calls them his friends. Now they are brothers.

But not just them. The phrase translated as brothers is an inclusive term. Go and tell my brothers and sisters, all who believe, all the sheep of my flock, that I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. Jesus has completed the work laid out in that prologue nineteen chapter before. He has given to any who receive him, who believe in his name, the power to become children of God. Alleluia! My Father and your Father; my God and your God.

So what? I always get so excited about Scripture and then my husband says “so what – so what does that mean for me today”.

Well, first of all, perhaps there are people here today who have never really worked out if they believe in Jesus. You are here to support a friend or family member, but haven't really thought much about faith yourself. That's fine – we are glad you are here. But before I finish, I simply want to make sure you know about the third, final and greatest gift I will mention today – the gift of God's love. It isn't complicated – despite the church's best efforts to make it so at times. You just receive it. And when you do, you have a Father in God, a brother in Jesus and a new family in this ragtag bunch sitting round about you. But honestly, don't let that last part put you off – knowing Jesus is simply the best way to live, and if you want to know more ask one of us after the service.

Secondly, my sisters, when the pains of the past and the challenges of the present wear you down, be encouraged by Jesus' commission of Mary Magdalene. You are inheritors of an apostolic commission that goes back to that Easter garden. Remember the one who called you by name and sent you to share the Gospel. As you try to be the gift God has called you to be, be inspired by our foremother. Seek Jesus like she did. Love Jesus like she did. Learn from Jesus like she did. Proclaim Jesus like she did. Build the Church like she did.

And for all of us as we try to be known not for our differences but for our love, may we remember that we are family with all who have received Jesus and believe in his name. Together we are children of God and when we embrace that, so many differences become small. As Bishop Philip said "it IS all about relationship" but that relationship is made possible not by the will of women and men, but by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The power that was at work raising Christ from the dead can be at work in us and in our relationships if we offer them to him. And then may we – by our love – proclaim and share the love of God with all. To the glory of God. Amen.