

**Sermon for Sunday 11 February 2024 – The Sunday next before Lent
Commissioning of Lay Elders**

The Ven David Jenkins. Archdeacon of Sudbury

2 Kings 2.1-12; Psalm 50.1-6; 2 Corinthians 4.3-6; Mark 9.2-9

So may I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please do sit.

Simon, thank you for the invitation to be here this morning to commission Elders. I suspect this was a slightly more stressful week than you were expecting, but it is very good to gather to admit five Lay Elders this morning. I know there are others eagerly waiting on the wings, and I will come back and do those as soon as is possible.

So it is that time of year when we look back. We put the crib figures away into the loft, and we turn our heads and look forward through Epiphany, through the Baptism of Christ, and onwards through to Lent and the Easter mysteries. As we gather here on the verge of Lent, we are gathered to commission new Lay Elders from two benefices and to celebrate the significant contribution the lay ministry makes, and continues to make, to the life of these two benefices, and indeed to the wider church. In so doing, we are reminded that we are reliant one upon the other, and that without that connection we are diminished as individuals. We are also reminded that as Christians, we are called to look out beyond ourselves and our immediate church context to the world beyond, for elders are about reaching out.

And so this morning, as we reflect upon the many varied forms of ministry within the church today, as we celebrate some of those forms here this morning, we are invited to place these local celebrations within a much wider, and indeed a universal, context to see our connections and our relationships as an outworking of the Trinity within God's economy. So here we are. We are the body of Christ. We are the Church. We are the living stones upon which Christ is building the kingdom. And those who encounter us in our roles as Priests and Churchwardens and Elders and members of the Church will judge the integrity of the Church by our integrity.

They will judge the integrity of the gospel by what we do and what we say. And just as a single hurtful word can spread like poison through the body ecclesiastical, so can a small act of Christian kindness bring forth great fruit, just like the tiny mustard seed of the yeast in the bread. Exponential growth beyond our wildest dreams, the faith of one, giving rise to the calling of many.

Today is not just for those who are to be commissioned Elders. Each one of us has a calling under God. Calling or vocation is discerned in many ways, perhaps as many ways as there are individuals. This is a significant moment both in the life of the church, and, brothers and sisters, in your own personal journeys of faith. It is a timely reminder that we all share the work of the kingdom. Ministry is not restricted to those who are ordained. Many of the tasks to which you have been called you will share not only with your

parish priest, but also with your fellow congregation members who are gathered here this morning to worship with you and to support you.

You will recall, I'm sure, Moses, when confronted by God's call, was very daunted by what was being asked of him. You may feel rather like Moses this morning. Ministry has the habit of surprising you when you least expect it. And so often even the most experienced of priests and incumbents find themselves brought up short of the unexpected and the previously unencountered. There is never a day when you can say you've seen it all. For those of you who are to be newly commissioned or recommissioned, all of this is to some extent new and hopefully exciting. Unlike Moses, you may well feel inadequate to the task. Indeed, I would be more concerned if you're not at least a little apprehensive.

Moses was so uncertain of himself that he bombarded God with a whole series of increasingly embarrassing 'what ifs'. What should he say to the people?

What if they would not listen to him? What if his powers of speech should fail him? Well, you may be well thinking about similar questions this morning that you would like to put to God as you stand before him to be commissioned as Lay Elders. But please be assured you are here because God has called you, because the church has recognised the validity of application in your life and in your ministry. Lay Elders are vital to the well being of the church and, as I said earlier, they are living testament to the truth that we are all called, lay or ordained, to serve God.

We are reminded this morning of the outworking of God's mission on earth, accomplished through the work of the Holy Spirit, working in turn through us, God's chosen people. We are God's hands and eyes here on earth. We are the tools which God has chosen to help bring about the kingdom of heaven here on earth. Each one of us here today has his or her part to play in the divine plan and to join in that eternal dance between father, Son and Holy Spirit, and us here on earth.

So what exactly are you agreeing to do? The doors are locked, so it's too late to flee. But your commission from Bishop Martin is pretty exhaustive in his list of expectations and duties. But they boil down to one essential; to love your neighbour as you love yourself. That is at the very heart of all good pastoral care, to love your neighbour as yourself.

You've been called to express that love for neighbour through prayer, through public proclamation of the word of God, through helping with the administration of the sacrament, both here in church, and beyond, to those in hospital and at home. Yours is to be a ministry of caring and sharing, of support for your priest and for your fellow laity, a ministry of evangelism, both within these walls and without.

You are called to these tasks at a challenging moment in the church's history, when we're having to think hard and afresh about the relationship between lay and ordained, and about the extent to which we all share in a corporate ministry. You don't need me to rehearse the narrative, though I'm about to do it, that the number of clergy, whether it's stipendary or self-supporting, is in steady, or remorseless, decline. It's

not quite true, but there's no doubt that there are challenges before us. The days when the church could aspire to an ordained priest in every parish in the land are fast becoming a fiction.

We now need to rethink how we do parochial ministry. The vital clog in that newly emerging pastoral care are ministries such as that to which you are being commissioned today. And I want to be really clear that it's not just about filling the gap, about making do, because we haven't got enough priests. It's about doing it differently, and, I would argue, much better. It's about being imaginative in releasing other people's callings and giftings and talents. It's about empowering each and every one of us to fulfil the vocation that God has given us.

Return to Moses for a second. Moses clearly felt completely unworthy; he was almost overwhelmed by what God was asking of him. There will be brothers and sisters, I expect, moments when you too will experience a similar sense of inadequacy or unworthiness, or at least there should be. When those moments come, remember that you're not doing this thing alone or of your own accord. Remember also that you're doing it at the very heart of the church's mission. The Holy Spirit has come down so that we might be helped to understand the true meaning of the gospel and to respond accordingly, that we might indeed be born again. It is your task and my task to constantly seek to remind people of this truth and of the covenant made by God with us. We do this through our public profession of faith, our carefully chosen words, and our considerate and self giving actions.

For you who have come forward as Lay Elders, your ministry is a public expression of God's love for his world and for its people. It is an outworking of the Holy Spirit and an outward and visible sign that God's redeeming work is ongoing and real in a world that so badly needs to hear that message.

Each one of us, not just the elders, not just the clergy, not just the readers, not just those who seem so good and worthy amongst us, all of us, are called to feed many. You may feel that you have not got enough faith to go round. You may indeed think you have trouble enough with your own faith, never mind anybody else's. And yet, like the mustard seed, elders are called to blossom in the service of the Lord so that many others might have their faith renewed and fed by the example and the faith of one. What we sow as ministers may indeed be like the fig tree, slow to bear fruit, but we need to stick with it and to persevere.

If the feast of the transfiguration is about anything, it's about encounter, and about, in particular, the encounter each of us may have with our Christ and Saviour. You recall from the readings a couple of weeks ago that Simeon and Anna had waited a lifetime to encounter the Christ. And as soon as they set eyes upon this child, they knew. They knew and recognised him for what he was, the Son of God in human form. In today's gospel, the three disciples are having a glimpse of Christ's divinity as they behold him to transfigure before their eyes.

For us, perhaps the light sometimes burns a little less brightly than it did for Simeon and for Anna. Perhaps we are more like the somewhat bemused Peter, James and John, who are not quite clear about what it is they are watching. We fail to recognise our moment of encounter for what it is. We talk much

these days of a vocation under God for all; but many of us, I think, including clergy, stumble around failing to hear the call. But if the church is truly to be the body of Christ here on earth, then each and every one of us needs to have that encounter, or at least be open to the reality, not the possibility, but the reality, that Christ waits to meet all of us, just he did that day over 2000 years ago when he came into the lives of Simeon and Anna.

And so on this day, when we recall the transfiguration, we are reminded of Christ's divinity. We are reminded that he is ready to meet us. And the question for us this morning is, are we ready to meet him? Brothers and sisters, all of you, but perhaps especially this day, for those of you who are about to be commissioned Elder, may God bless you, and bless everything you do and say in his name. Amen.