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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : First Sunday after Trinity
Sunday 19th June 2022

JUNE 19, 2022 – TRINITY 1

Exactly 45 years ago today was the last Sunday I was officially a lay Church member. The following Sunday, 26 June 1977, I was made a Deacon at Hereford Cathedral, donned a dog collar and began my work as an ordained Church of England Minister! Thankfully it is a step I have never had cause to regret and I still enjoy my work. But there is definitely a big difference between being a lay and being an ordained member of the church. There has also been a huge change between the church of 1977 and the church of 2022! Let me give a simple example from my own experience.

In my first parish, there was one Vicar and two Curates on the staff. True we had one larger church and five smaller churches to care for – but as I say there were three of us. Our Sunday routine was 8am, 9.30am, 11am, 3.15pm, 6pm and then at 8pm visiting and compulsory public prayers in the two wards of the local cottage hospital. Ultimately what I now realise is how little lay involvement there was in worship. The only thing a lay person was allowed to do was to read the first lesson. Yes, lay members ran the Sunday School and there was a gang of teenagers who were our altar servers together with a boy's only choir to lead the singing – but everything else was covered by the clergy. There wasn't even coffee served after services. Today in that parish: there is just one Vicar serving three churches; the other 3 have sadly shut.

How times change. I am sure some of you will have similar experiences, particularly if you have been a member of a church for any length of time. Over the past few decades, the church in general is having to rely far less on the ordained

clergy and more on lay members of the church taking on leadership roles. Yes, it is true that vocations to the ordained ministry have been holding up reasonably well in the last few years – but nevertheless there are not enough to go around. Add to that mix the consequences of the recent Covid pandemic which has seen a significant drop in income all round – and the Church of England, along with all other faiths, is feeling the pinch. Indeed, in some Dioceses, there has been a halt in filling vacant parishes. Here in Southwark the picture is thankfully not so bleak – but there is still pressure.

So it is that the Bishop of Southwark has launched what he has called ‘The Season of Lay Ministries’, starting today and running till mid-July. He writes that ‘this season of lay ministries is a good time to thank those involved in the many tasks that are undertaken to ensure the smooth running of the parish, its services and pastoral care. We are greatly blessed here in the Diocese with so many people who are willing to give of their time and their abilities to ensure that God’s Good News is shared widely’. He continues: ‘I give thanks for all that they do and trust that this time will be of great encouragement to them’. So can I personally take this opportunity to thank all of you for all you give to this church in so many different ways. I value very greatly the involvement of everyone who gives of their times and gifts so generously. Thank you.

But of course, that is not all. The other strand of this season is to encourage and help others to think about exploring what God might be calling them to do – and there is lots of information available on what lay ministries are available. There are some leaflets on the table and on the Diocesan website. Two obvious ones are the lay ministry of being a trained Reader or Lay Minister– as Flis and Farhad are – or by being a Southwark Pastoral Auxiliary as Sarah Castle, until recently, was. Of course, both of these require a good deal of commitment in terms of training and so on – but it is never too early to pray for new people to think about offering themselves for such important ministries. Yes, it is inevitable that those two examples are pretty public and naturally such ministry is not for everyone. But there are lots of more local tasks which are needed for the parish to run. I think back 45 years and wish that those Shropshire churches had all arranged after service coffee – a ministry so important!

I guess what I am suggesting is that it is all about teamwork. No longer, thank goodness, should everything be left up to the clergy as I experienced it 45 years ago. Now everyone has a part to play in the life of the church, however small or seemingly insignificant the contribution. I have long thought that a church congregation can be likened to an orchestra. So I was delighted to hear these words from Charles Hazelwood, one of the UK's most imaginative conductors. In a TV programme he said: "Orchestral teamwork is the most perfect form of teamwork. No one is more important than anyone else but everyone has value". For orchestra substitute church.

The reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians reminds us of the importance of grace and humility. Paul reminds us that in Jesus, the community of faith includes those whom we might find unlikely and unlovely. The Scriptures show us that God chose and called people rich and poor, well-educated or not, administrators, those with menial jobs etc., etc., As we journey through the Trinity season, alive to the Holy Spirit, we pray that we will respect that it is by God's grace and mercy that we have been given the gifts we have to his glory and we pray that we live the faith that "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

In the Diocese of Southwark there is a commitment to encouraging more lay ministry and vocations and to develop a wide range of recognised lay ministries. But, whether lay or ordained, Christians are all called to work together to carry out God's mission both within the church and in the world. We thank God for everyone who plays a part.