

Reimagining Ministry – What is ministry and what part can I play?

Lent Lecture 2016

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I gather I am meant to have one of the gift boxes and magician style pull out a series of objects which without hesitation deviation or repetition and indeed explanation make crystal clear what Transforming Presence and this evening Reimagining Ministry is all about.

This is what I took to my computer on Saturday – very smugly I thought I had got this evening sorted ages ago. Last November I found steroids and retreat don't really go together. But high on steroids I managed in a very short period both to work exactly what I wanted to say this evening and got it written. Safe on the hard drive there was my magnum opus ready to be delivered to huge accolade. Except ... when I went to retrieve this masterpiece, could I find it ...

So of course no problem – let's turn to Google. That always has the answer

Ministry synonyms - holy orders, the priesthood, the cloth, the church, "he's training for the ministry"

It's complete rubbish – almost the opposite of what ministry is all about – but it's what a lot of people think ministry is and probably if we are honest it's our default picture.

So I have taken a hammer to my computer – though to be honest the original is probably better lost. I know my thinking has changed massively over the last 3 months. A notional hammer to Google for getting it so wrong and I am afraid a massive hammer to our default picture when we hear the word ministry.

Indeed it's so unhelpful that I am not even going to use the word again this evening.

I think I'll use the word 'Marsflight' – we all secretly would love to do it, but it's a remote impossible dream, we think it's only for the specialist and it's a journey of no return, and we could never afford the fare.

So here's the good news – Marsflight is more fun than being cooped up in a space rocket for 18 months or so, is available here and now, it's for everyone and rather than costing \$500 billion it's a gift – for free! You can't do better than that.

So it's the box itself which is my first object – it's like Neil Macgregor's the History of the World in 100 Objects. Marsflight – Ministry, I'll get confused even if you don't - is a gift. It is a gift to the church, a gift to the world and a gift to us as individuals. And like all gifts from God he gives it in abundance. Let's take the hammer to another myth. There is no shortage of ministry – ministers. We may be down on the number of Vicars, but we are not down on people discovering they have a ministry – often without realising that is what they have discovered. God does not go for shortages, lack, insufficiencies. He revels in generosity, abundance, grace. It is us who take his abundance and somehow turn it into scarcity. Each one of us has a ministry, a vocation, and it probably isn't to ordination. Be relieved. In the order of vocations, of ministries ordination comes a long way down.

Peter talks about us being 'a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation'. He didn't mean we all become Vicars – they aren't really any Vicars in the New Testament times – or Bishops for that matter. He did mean we are chosen by God, called by God, as the body of Christ to create the holy space, the temple if

you like, where people encounter God and find a relationship with him. And just to bring down the hammer again that is not necessarily in a church building. When we talk about scarcity with ministry it is because we are looking in the wrong place for the wrong thing. Don't get me wrong I don't have a downer on people who sense a vocation to ordination – if you have the faintest echo of a whisper then catch me at the end of the evening. But that is not the sum total of ministry. If we believe God is faithful and trustworthy then we need to look wider for his abundance and generosity. So let's open the box and see what God offers.

Are you a glass half full or half empty person?

Ministry is Liquorice Allsorts not Jelly Babies. Open the box and each of us will find something different inside – even if like ordination or Licensed Lay Ministry it might seem the same at first glance. I feel a hammer moment coming on again here – though it doesn't work well on Jelly Babies. It's Paul who tells us time and again there is one spirit but a variety of ministries – and none of his lists are exhaustive. [prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, showing mercy; or again apostles, prophets, teachers, workers of miracles, gifts of healing, administration, the gift of tongues]. How do we get it so wrong? We are each unique. Look anywhere and you can see God loves diversity, variety. There were some wonderful pictures – beautiful – of tear drops. The real thing – not another variety of sweet. Dried they were each unique, different patterns formed out of the salts as the tear dried out. Are you not more wonderful than tear drops?

God creates us each different because he wants us to be unique – shaped and formed by our genes, our experiences, our relationships- all that we have been through the good and the hard, the joyous and the sad, the highs and the lows.

Discipleship is the journey we share together as Christians as the image of Christ is formed in us. Ministry is the distinctive flavour each of us brings to that.

But it is like Liquorice Allsorts – or perhaps a box of Thornton’s Chocolates. They are no good on their own. We each bring a part which together makes the whole. Paul’s image of the body of Christ – the hand, the foot, the head, the eye, the ear, the little toe nail, the appendix. Each contributes something which together forms the body – even apparently the appendix for those who still have one. Imagine a multi-faceted diamond. You have to imagine, I haven’t got one in the box. Each face is beautiful in its own right reflecting the different colours of light, but it is only when you see the whole that you catch the full splendour.

That is the beauty of Mission and Ministry Units – Planet 9 – the undiscovered Planet. Of course each congregation is a joy and a glory in their own right. But working together we reflect so much more the full glory of the God who calls us to serve. We get it so wrong when we think it is about structure and bureaucracy and being church focused. Mission and Ministry Units are about relationship, about dreaming wild and impossible dreams, about looking outwards and moving outwards. And discovering under God that what we thought impossible is reality.

Liquorice Allsorts or Jelly Babies?

So if no diamonds in the box – what next?

Personally I hate drinking the stuff, but you remember the advert – reaches the parts other lagers couldn’t reach. That’s ministry. Ministry is not about serving the church. It is about serving God in the world. It’s not what happens

in here – Sunday by Sunday at 10 am. But what happens out there – Monday to Saturday (and Sunday) 24/7. It is the Street Pastors (note to Noisy Phil in Billericay), the Food banks, the Money Advice Centres, the Care Homes, the hospitals and hospices, the Prisons, the schools and FE Colleges and Universities, the Carer and Toddler Groups, and Westfield and Lakeside and Freeport, and in the funerals, the baptisms the weddings, and where we work, and where we live and where take recreation. ‘As the Father sent me, so send you’ has become the strapline of our Cathedral. It needs to permeate our DNA as individuals and as congregations. Church is resourcing us for ministry not the focus of ministry. Those who serve in Church are simply the servants of the servants of God to quote Gregory the Great. And it is about reaching into the forgotten corners of the world – whether that is the camps in the Lebanon or Calais, or much nearer to home among the lost, the unloved (and the unlovable) the lonely, the dying, the weary and those who feel they have no value worth. As Bishop Stephen reminded us at Synod last Saturday – Galatians 2: 10 words of the Jerusalem Church to Paul – all they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

But of course with Heineken it doesn’t just reach the parts other lagers cannot reach. It ‘refreshes;’ them. We’ll stop the analogy there, because the Gospel, the Good News is rather more effective than Heineken or even Peroni about bringing refreshment, life, hope, joy. It’s not just what we do, it’s what we have to say and it’s not just what we do or say it is who we are. There’s discipleship creeping in again. Go to Canvey and they give you a stick of rock. That’s not in the box because I’ve eaten it. Anyway Canvey Rock is a bit of a fraud. It’s supposed to have Canvey Island written through it top to bottom. It actually says ‘Holiday Rock’. Don’t be a fraud. We need Jesus written right through us – head to toe. Slice in half and half again and still you should be

able to read Jesus. Talking to someone the other day she said about her work colleagues – I haven't told them I am a Christian, but they all seem to know and come and talk to me about all sorts of things. I took one look and could see immediately why that was the case. I don't think she could see it, but one glance showed the joy of the Gospel and the glory of God shining through every pore of her body. What a ministry! Think Transfiguration.

How do we get Jesus written through all we are and do?

And so what's left in the box. What's the final gift? I thought about a mirror. But instead after much delving and rummaging I have dug out this photo. 2009 – never really having sailed before I'm the one who gets sea sick on a trip round the bay in a pedalo. Here I am at the helm of a 20 metre Ocean racing Yacht – cool calm collected in total control on heading out on the Atlantic to South America on the first leg of a Round the World Yacht Race. We have just welcomed Theo our first grandchild – three weeks' old on Tuesday. He is still very cute. Theodore means God's gift. I wonder what he will be in 57 years' time. So much potential. So many possibilities. In your gift box the photo is not of me but of you. You, too, are a gift from God. What is your calling? What is the shape of your ministry?

It may be to a licensed ministry – ordination as an incumbent, associate priest, chaplain, minister in secular employment a pioneer; or licensed lay ministry – a lay theologian teaching preaching. Or perhaps to an authorised ministry as a pastoral assistant, an authorised local preacher, an evangelism enabler, a youth or children's worker, a lay pioneer minister or to what I often call informal ministries a school governor, a street pastor, helping in a food bank, a community café, a debt counsellor or wider vocations in health care, education, banking, business, refuse collection. The list is of course endless.

How do I discover my vocation, my ministry? It's somewhere in the meeting place of your gifts, your passions and the needs of the world. The Venn Diagram from your school days. We all have things that we are good at which leave us cold; and things that we are passionate about but actually pretty hopeless; and things that we are good at and passionate about but which don't really meet the needs we see around. There is nothing wrong with any of that. But ministry tends lie where those three come together. Though as with all things with God, also be prepared to be surprised. He sees things in us that we often don't see in ourselves. Others may and it is worth listening to them. The Shape Course is a great way of exploring vocation in that wider sense.

Where are you gifts, your passions, where do you see need?

So there we have it.

Ministry as gift reflecting the generosity and abundance of God. It's a gift to each one of us, not a right, a privilege or an obligation. A gift to us as individuals, to the body of Christ, and ultimately for the common good – for the world in which we serve.

It's Liquorice Allsorts and not Jelly Babies – diversity and variety and not cloning.

It's Heineken – reaching and refreshing the places where no one else goes – the margins, the edges, the forgotten corners of our communities – Remember the poor.

And it's people like us – not some strange wonderfully gifted, super articulate, charismatic character that I could never be. God calls me and God calls you – each one – to the ministry he has shaped and formed you for and which he has prepared for you to step into. No one else can.

And just you in case you still don't believe it. Don't forget the hammer. It's not there as a threat, but to smash those myths and half-truths that set false boundaries and limit our imagination and possibilities and ultimately trap and imprison us into being less than the people God sees us to be.

So what are you doing about it?

God grant us wisdom, courage and humility as we seek out our calling and our ministry in his service and for the good of all. In him may we find fullness of life, joy of heart and peace of spirit.