

The ordination of Margaret Neate, St Peter's

Readings: 2 Samuel 2:14-22, John 21:15-19

Thank you, Margaret, for asking me to preach on this very special occasion. We here at St Peter's feel very privileged to have you as our curate.

I wonder if any of us have ever felt like the author of this prayer...

*Dear Lord,
So far today I've done all right.
I haven't gossiped,
haven't lost my temper,
haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or overindulgent.
I'm really glad about that.
But in a few minutes, God,
I'm going to get out of bed.
and from then on,
I'm going to need a lot more help.*

In a few minutes Margaret is going to need a lot more help as she answers yes to a whole series of questions. She will answer that she will study the Scriptures, witness, be guided, work in partnership, seek the lost and lonely, show love, care, compassion, demonstrate justice, peace, strength, humility, prayer, imagination, perseverance, and, for good measure, in her spare time, she will build up the body of Christ and proclaim the word of God and celebrate the sacraments! No pressure there then!

What a list. I don't know about Margaret, but I can remember 30 years ago feeling more than a little apprehensive hearing that list at my priesting.

So, the question I'm sitting with today is - how? How can Margaret, how can any of us really live up to the demands of being a Christian, let alone being a priest?

St Peter too is facing a lot of questions in our Gospel this afternoon. Jesus asks him not once, not twice, but three times, "Do you love me?" We read that Peter felt hurt because Jesus kept asking him, "Do you love me?" Jesus is appearing to the disciples on the beach after his resurrection. And like Margaret, Peter is being given a new ministry. But why does Jesus keep asking him, "Do you love me?" On one level Jesus is graciously allowing Peter to undo his three-fold denial of Jesus. Remember the rooster? But something else is happening that is much more subtle, something we can only see in the Greek. The first time Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" he uses the word *agape* for love. In other words, "Do you love me with unconditional love?" Peter answers, "Yes. You know that I love you," but the word Peter uses for love is the love of a sibling. I love you as a brother. Peter is saying I can't love you that deeply yet. By the last question Jesus has pulled back from asking for unconditional love, and accepts the love that Peter is able to give. How honest of Peter to say he can't yet give unconditional love, how caring of Jesus to accept only what he can offer. Jesus' question, "Do you love me?" is a question he is asking us too and we can spend our whole lives growing into the answer. Jesus accepts very gently the answer we are ready to give. Jesus' love of us is unconditional agape love, even if we aren't ready to give that level of love in return yet. Peter grew into his answer and gives his life for Jesus.

But what will sustain us? What will sustain Margaret in her priestly ministry? What is it that has sustained me in mine?

In a word, joy. Joy. We see that joy present in our first reading. King David is so filled with delight at the return of the ark of the covenant to its rightful place in the temple in Jerusalem, that he dances with joy. He dresses in a loin cloth and dances. His groupies are embarrassed, but he doesn't seem to mind. Now don't get me wrong there is no expectation on the modern priest to find a loin cloth and dance into church. I couldn't inflict that on any congregation. But the point is this: simple joy, delight, contentment in God will sustain any ministry. The ordination service puts it beautifully:-“and let your joy in Christ overcome all discouragement.”

To find that sweet spot of joy, which most often is found in prayer, is to find a well that never runs dry. To know in our own lives the presence of our Risen Saviour is to know life sustaining delight.

John Knox, that famous Anglican, wrote one of my favourite quotes.

“The church is not a memorial society with its eyes fixed on a long-departed master, it is a dynamic joy filled community with the risen Christ at its centre.”

Every time we gather, we believe that we gather with the risen Jesus. When Margaret breaks bread or breaks open the Bible, the resurrected Christ is there with her.

Hold on to this simple truth Margaret, Christ is with you, and let all joy flow from him. That will sustain you. That will sustain us too.

Sometimes we try and measure how successful our ministry is. Don't try and measure your success leave that up to God, simply be faithful.

The measure of our ministries is not up to us, but the faithfulness is.

I believe Margaret will be as she is - so very faithful.

In the third century a monk lived on his own in a little compound away from the city but on a main trade route. His walled compound surrounded a well that he would draw water from for any passer-by. This was his simple ministry. In his spartan hut he used to pray. But when the bell was rung, he would get up and go and draw water for the traveller. He often journeyed to the market to get supplies. One day when talking with another Christian he heard that some of them were having visions of the risen Christ. How he longed for a vision of the risen One. Then one day it happened. He was praying and the risen Christ came and stood in front of him. The light and warmth from his face filled the whole hut and filled his heart with joy. At that moment, the bell rang - a traveller needed water. What to do, stay with Jesus or go? How he longed to stay with the vision. Eventually and so reluctantly he got up from his knees and went out to greet the stranger and draw them some water. He ran back to the hut and there to his utter delight was the risen Christ, and as he knelt in adoration, the vision spoke, “If you had not gone, I would not have stayed.”

Pause.

Sustained by the presence of the risen Christ and the joy that brings, Margaret can do anything. Sustained by the presence of the risen Christ and the joy that brings, we can do anything - thanks be to God!