

Ascension Day Sermon : 5 May 2016
150th Anniversary of the Modern Reader Movement
All Souls Church Langham Place London

Readings: Acts 1. 1-11; Psalm 93; Ephesians 4. 7-16; Luke 24. 44-53

O God, who commanded light to shine out of darkness:
shine in our hearts to bring us to the light of the knowledge of your glory
shining in the face of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.** *From 2 Corinthians 4. 5, 6*

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

1 It's a joy and privilege for all of us to be here today to celebrate the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ and the 150th Anniversary (the sesquicentenary). of the founding of the modern Reader movement in these islands. I note from ads on the tube that it's also the 150th anniversary of Jack Daniels whisky and that 'Private Eye' describes this week as 'Historic'.

In a few weeks time this Reader movement is offering to the Church a celebration, not of ministry, but of discipleship. **'Follow 2016'** in Leicester on 16 July will be another great blue-and-white celebration for that deliriously happy footballing and snookering City, and we hope you'll join us with lots of friends.

An email was forwarded to me from someone letting off steam because he'd heard that a bishop, rather than a Reader, was going to preach today. I decided I'd better own up, and received this reply: *'I will draw comfort from knowing that during your 7 years' service as CRC chairman enough will have rubbed off from colleagues to have qualified you as almost a Reader.'* Genuinely, I take that as a compliment.

150 years ago on Ascension Day at Lambeth Palace, 3 Archbishops and 17 Bishops (from Southern Africa, West Africa, Australia, England, Ireland, Wales and the Isle of Man) met to institute this new order into which men (yes, all men before 1969) were admitted by prayer and the delivery of the New Testament *'without imposition of hands'*. Some general churchy duties were envisaged, but the key to understanding this new office was the reading of *'prayers and Holy Scripture and explaining the same'* in contexts outside the normal worshipping life of the parish churches. This was largely a response to the need for evangelism in urban settings, where the majority of people were unchurched, as the 1851 census had proved. The early Lay Reader worked on the boundaries between church and world as a teacher and an evangelist, often involved in activities that were parallel to fresh expressions of church and messy church today.

2 I've spent a proportion of my life involved in liturgical revision - my wife says I should get out more. On Ascension Day, I think we get it wrong by reading the Acts of the Apostles first and the Gospel of Luke last.

Luke draws together the story of the life and earthly ministry of Jesus to a fulfilling close: *'You are witnesses of all these things'* so *'stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high'*. Luke is bringing the aircraft down onto the runway where we'll find rest and blessing after a turbulent flight that began in Bethlehem and ended in Jerusalem.

The second book, Acts, begins at the same point in the story but the tone is radically changed. Here the aircraft is at the end of the runway, facing into the wind with the engines at full throttle. Jesus' promise and ascension leave the *'men of Galilee'* – fishermen and the like - dumbfounded! In what seems no time at all the brakes are

released and they begin to feel the dynamic energy of acceleration, speed and lift-off. They and their companions are baptized with the Holy Spirit and propelled to the ends of the earth in witness.

Sandwiched between these stories we read the Apostle Paul's reflections on the Ascension of Christ.

Ascension Day is ministry day. I know why we have reaffirmations of ministerial commitment on Maundy Thursday, because lots of ministers gather for Chrism Eucharists on that day, so it's convenient; but the day for ministry should be today, which is why it was so appropriate to found a ministry movement on Ascension Day. Paul describes the ascended Christ's gifts for ministry. These gifts were for offices in the Church: *'apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers'*. They were given for three main tasks: *'for equipping the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ'*. And the ultimate purpose is *'to bring us to the unity inherent in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ, ... speaking the truth in love, ... growing into Christ, the head'*. Licensed Lay Ministers fit exactly into what St Paul calls *'the work of ministry'*.

Our understanding of that biblical word *'ministry'* swung back and forwards in the twentieth century until it became common for every Christian to talk about having *'a ministry'*. Ministry displaced discipleship. But we know now that the word had much more specific connotations in the world of the New Testament. For Paul and others, a minister is a commissioned envoy, an accountable messenger with a task to fulfil and a vital message to deliver; this ministry fits perfectly.

- 3 Reader ministry has never been static, and, partly as a result of the pressures of two world wars, Readers drifted, willingly for the most part, into the multiple roles of general ecclesiastical factotum, eucharistic minister, often churchwarden, priest's assistant, omnipresent helper - *'Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to my scarf I cling.'*

That can't be right: the Church trains Readers to be competent with the Bible, and with the application of Scripture in their context. It is a distinct ministry with a distinct potential and a clear integrity, helping other people to hear and make sense of what God is saying to them in their unique place and time. You are trained in theology; God-talk is your specialism, which is why the training is tough and demanding. It's not about being other-worldly, or technically competent in the dating of Deuteronomy or the symbolism of the Revelation, but being a person who can bring God into the conversation with people who are searching and with those who have lost their way. Being a theologian in a secular culture is, in the words of Archbishop Michael Ramsey, *'to be exposed to the vision of heaven and to the tragedies of mankind.'*

A Reader is confidently lay. So, is delegation what this ministry is all about? Are Readers appointed simply to perform those tasks of ordained ministry that can be delegated to lay people? Often the Reader is thought of as a 'priest-minus', a 'priest-lite'; that is, everything that a cleric should be minus the sacraments. Certainly not. As lay people, your day-to-day life needs to be rooted outside the organisation of the Church. You must be confidently lay, team-players certainly, but not in holy orders, and occasionally even 'out of order'!

Do you remember Nigel, the Reader, played by Miles Jupp in the TV series *'Rev'*? Stephen Cherry commented: *'Smart Readers will realise that they can do ministry, do theology, share in God's mission without getting involved in all the 'stuff' that attaches to the clergy. ... What was sad about Nigel was that he was so churchy and so much wanted to be a vicar. The tragedy was that he did not see that his churchiness was precisely what would undermine his ministry ...'*

Too often we confuse people about the gospel by giving the false impression that we are bothered only about matters that to everyone else seem like trivialities. More than

ever today the Church needs people who can take what's going on in the world and reflect on it with a theological perspective. And the world needs people who can put into words what they know of God and his love, and reflect on it in secular life, outside the boundaries of church. Readers/LLMs are ideally placed to meet this need.

- 4 The Executive of the Central Readers' Council, preparing for the *next* 150 years, recently made two bold proposals that were affirmed in discussion at the recent AGM. It asked that the Lay Ministry Working Group might consider the dissolution of the Central Readers' Council and its replacement with something like a lay ministry council; and it also proposed a constitutional change that would allow it to help fund regional lay ministry projects.

If something like that happens, as we hope it will, the future will not be 'readers-and-others' as the Canons of the Church of England assume, but 'readers-among-others', a wide range of paid and unpaid lay ministers authorised by bishops, including evangelists, teachers of the faith, chaplains, pioneers, lay congregation leaders, pastoral assistants, youth and children's workers, community workers, worship leaders and others. Working alongside clergy they'll build up the evangelistic, the pastoral, the formational and the liturgical life of the Church, and serve God's mission in the world.

The future is exciting for this movement. Confidence is returning. Pray for the future. It's Ascension Day. The risen and enthroned Christ promises to bestow his gifts on his people. *'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth.'*

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

+Robert Sodor as Mannin