



ORDINATION SERVICE

ADDRESS

Methodist Conference 2015

Blenheim

Te Hāhi Weteriana O Aotearoa

Ordination Service Address

Sunday 15 November 2015

Marlborough Convention Centre, Blenheim

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Jeremiah 29:1,4-7

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 17:11-19

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Fear not, Ordinands, I am not about to say that the places to which we have stationed you will feel as if you are exiled to distant Babylon; but Jeremiah's advice to settle in and seek the well-being of those to whom you are sent and thereby you will secure your own well-being, is advice that still stands. And in any case, Invercargill isn't available this year. No, it's another aspect that I wish to draw from this passage from Jeremiah.

It's an awful position to be in when people expect you to have good news to share and you only have bad news. Anyone who has ever told a pupil they have failed an exam; any instructor who has failed someone on their driving test and any doctor who has delivered the bad news despite the surgery, will know just how truly awful that position can be.

Jeremiah is famed for being the prophet who always had bad news. That is unfair of course, because Jeremiah did offer the promise of future return from Exile and the prospect of a new covenant, but his whole ministry is overshadowed by the years of dismal warnings of impending doom.

Today's passage from Jeremiah 29 is certainly one of those gloomier bits. He writes to those taken in the first, smaller deportation to Babylon in 597BC and warns them that they should settle in for a long wait for any good news. Build houses, plant gardens, marry and have children – these are long term plans and dash any hopes of a quick return to Jerusalem. This is not what they wanted to hear.

Jeremiah paid the price for his unpopular preaching and was thrown down a dry well for a few days to shut him up. So be warned! In New Zealand the well may not be dry.

It is impossible to please all of the people all of the time in any profession and that is equally true of ministry. Some ministers are afraid of confrontation and avoid contentious subjects, often to the detriment of their congregations, because they believe ministers should bring harmony and peace to a parish, and never a Word that is as sharp as a two-edged sword.

Some prefer the quiet life to upsetting the people, especially upsetting the local power brokers on the parish council or the power brokers in the church hierarchy. The Church has suffered a lot of damage from ministers who have simply trotted out the acceptable group-think of the Establishment, rather than risk the controversy of prophetic ministry.

Peter fell prey to this temptation when he refused to eat with the Gentiles in Galatia, despite having pronounced Cornelius the Gentile would never be deemed “unclean” again. If Wesley had cared more about his reputation and his personal safety than he did for obeying the Holy Spirit, Methodism would never have left the colleges of Oxford.

Other preachers, however, revel in being controversial and seem to assume that the more people disagree with them the more in the right they must be. This brings us to the conundrum of discernment: how do we recognise when someone we disagree with is telling us a truth we don't want to face and how do we know when we are right in resisting because they are truly bad ideas?

Unfortunately, truth isn't a democrat; we cannot simply assume the majority view is always the right one; but we must at least respect the majority view and be very sure of ourselves before we strike out in another direction. The collective wisdom of the Church cannot be easily dismissed.

For Jeremiah, time itself was enough to prove that he had in fact been right all along; but that is small comfort for you if you are the one thrown into the bottom of a well, or under siege in your parish office; or simply can't wait that long for an answer.

Paul once advised his young protégé, Timothy, to discern the nature of the argument itself, before engaging in any struggle. He differentiates between quarrels that are about “mere words” and disputes about the “word of truth.” The first task is to judge whether the victory merits the battle; too many churches tear themselves apart over relatively minor differences.

Do not put the Body of Christ at risk of injury over a matter of little consequence to those who have not yet found salvation. You may feel passionately about whether ministers have to be married to their partners,

whether gay people may be President or whether Methodists may place a bet in the Melbourne Cup – but keep those disputes within reasonable bounds – do not tear the Church to pieces and deter people from seeking salvation – because of your disputatious character.

Even if you are right, you do not have to win every argument.

The Church has always been aware that there is a rightful distinction between core beliefs and peripheral beliefs and practices, but she has struggled from the beginning to define what belongs to the core, for which every sinew must be stretched in defence, and what belongs to the periphery, best reserved for academic essays or to be decided according to local tastes.

The great Creeds of the Church were attempts to find a globally binding set of core beliefs, and the Apostles Creed and Nicene Creed have stood the test of time remarkably well; but they haven't prevented all the arguing. Historians will recall the big argument over one iota in the creed.

The Catholics talk about a “hierarchy of truths”; Wesley spoke of the marrow of the faith and mere opinions in a similar way to keep disputes to a minimum and allow for unity with diversity, whilst not risking the core of the Gospel that should bind all Christians together.

In his famously eirenic *Letter to a Roman Catholic* Wesley says to any opponents:

If then we cannot as yet think alike in all things, at least may we love alike.

Wesley spoke of this same theme in two sermons in particular. In Sermon 38: *Against Bigotry*, he defines bigotry as “too strong an attachment to, or fondness for, our own party, opinion, Church and religion.” In his better known Sermon 39: *The Catholic Spirit*, written in 1755 in the aftermath of troubles in Ireland, Wesley repeats the mantra, “though we cannot think alike, may we love alike” and continues:

To be ignorant of many things, and to mistake in some, is the necessary condition of humanity. [Every thinking man] knows in general, that he himself is mistaken; although in what particulars he mistakes, he does not, perhaps cannot know.

Accepting human fallibility, Wesley states:

God has given no right to any of the children of men thus to lord it over the conscience of his brethren; but every man must judge for himself, as every man must give an account of himself to God.

Wesley was unusually open, by the standards of his day, to extending the hand of fellowship to those who belonged to other Church traditions which, in his view, did not preach the Word of God faithfully, nor duly celebrate the sacraments, because he believed the ethic of Christian love overruled all other considerations. So Wesley continued in his Sermon on the *Catholic Spirit* that if you love God, if you believe in Jesus Christ, if you are trying to do God's will, if you love your neighbour, then:

If thou art thus minded...then 'thy heart is right, as my heart is with thy heart. If it be, give me thy hand.' I do not mean, 'Be of my opinion.' You need not...Neither do I mean, 'I will be of your opinion.' I cannot...Let all opinions alone on one side, and the other: Only 'give me thine hand.'

This is not an invitation to be either vacuous, or vacillating. It is about living in harmony with those who have equally strong moral and religious convictions to your own, but to make love the greater part.

To be authentically Methodist you must foster Wesley's "catholic spirit".

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This means that the Church will always be a mixture of truth and nonsense. It was always thus and the New Testament recognizes it.

Paul used the analogy of erecting a building in his *First Letter to the Corinthians*; he says that Jesus has laid the true foundation, but then it is up to us Christians to decide how we build upon that. Some will build in gold and silver and precious stones, whilst others will build in wood and hay – and significantly, we may not be able to discern the difference until the final judgement when all is tested as by fire (1 Cor 3:1-15).

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul uses the image of a completed building, saying that any large house will contain items of both silver and gold, as well as items of wood and clay (2 Tim 2:20).

The story of the 10 lepers healed by Jesus in Luke 17:11-19 also raises this issue of discernment. The story takes place on the border between Samaria and Galilee; the group of lepers is (by inference) a mixed bunch of 9 Jews

and 1 Samaritan; they behave appropriately according to the Jewish Law and keep their distance from others and therefore shout to Jesus from a safe distance. They all show a measure of discernment in that they address Jesus as “Master” and have some confidence that he will have pity upon them.

This may have been simply a form of address to anyone from whom they sought gifts of food or money – showing exaggerated respect by addressing them as a social superior, “Master,” in the hope their flattery might reach the traveller’s purse.

Or it could easily have been more than that; they may be acting upon recognizing Jesus and his disciples (for they had spent much of their time around Galilee) and they may well have known of his healing abilities. After mass healings in Capernaum and his miracle at the wedding at Cana, it is hard to imagine they didn’t know exactly who Jesus was.

As with the centurion’s servant and the Syro-Phoenician woman’s daughter, Jesus heals at a distance by a word of command. He sends the lepers off to show themselves to the priests, who would have the authority to permit them back into the community upon proof that their leprosy, or whatever skin disease, had now gone. By so starting that journey in faith towards the priests, they discovered they were cleansed. (Luke 17:14).

All 10 of the lepers had correctly discerned Jesus’s willingness and ability to help them, but only the Samaritan had shown the greater discernment of recognizing Jesus as God’s representative – which he demonstrates by his posture of worship, falling prostrate at Jesus’ feet.

That is the place of true discernment – the presence of Jesus.

On occasions we do not know which way to turn; we can see right and wrong on both sides; we find the matter too complex for our understanding; we just do not know what to think to do the right thing.

But the greatest discernment we can make is that Jesus is our Saviour and the Son of God. If our decisions and instincts on difficult and disputed matters bring us safely and with good conscience to the feet of our Master, then perhaps we may judge that we have chosen correctly; or at the very least, that we are not totally wrong.

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The Church is called to be a signpost to lead people to Christ. As ministers, it is your job to make sure the signpost is pointing in the right direction. Our reading from Act 8 gives us a hint how we might discern what that true direction is.

In Acts 8:14-17, the Apostles Peter and John face a tremendous temptation to get in the way of Christ, to become barriers in the way of salvation, rather than God's chosen signposts to the kingdom.

It had come to their notice that the Samaritans had voiced their support for the Gospel message. We all know of the animosity between Jew and Samaritan. Yet here were these Samaritans wanting to join the Church. Presumably they had not been evangelised by the Apostles themselves up to this point. So how would the Jewish leaders react to the Samaritans muscling in on their patch?

Peter and John had a momentous choice before them. The Samaritans had been baptised – they uncontestedly belonged therefore to the faithful – and yet they had not received the Holy Spirit. What a temptation for these Jewish Apostles to keep the Samaritans as second-class Christians! Yet they knew the power of the Holy Spirit was not theirs to play with to satisfy their own love of power, but they were simply the chosen conduits through whom Christ was giving the Holy Spirit to those who believed.

Peter and John stepped aside from over 400 years of antagonism and mistrust and blessed them with the Holy Spirit. As ministers, you will often be called to get out of the way so that the Spirit may work through you.

Conformity to outward ecclesiastical practice and official Church teaching is not the main point; the main point is participation in the life of the Spirit. This is shown again in Luke's account of Peter at the home of Cornelius the Centurion in Acts 10:44, when baptism **follows** the manifestation of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentile household. Here in Acts 8, baptism **precedes** the Holy Spirit.

Wesley also defined the Church not by ecclesiastical rite, not even counting baptism into his beloved Church of England as sufficient, but for Wesley what counted were signs of the New Birth.

Wesley espoused a very ecumenical spirit for his age. He was less worried about outward conformity to ecclesiastical rule and custom and more concerned about whether people exhibited signs of a grace-filled life.

Unusually for his time, this definition of true Church, allowed Wesley to accept the authenticity of other Christians from the Catholic tradition on the one hand, to the Moravians on the other. Anyone trying to live a life of scriptural holiness was a fellow traveller to Wesley, even if they belonged to a Church that according to his view, held erroneous doctrines. Wesley would have included both the Catholics and Moravians in that category, but for him life in the Holy Spirit was the crucial factor.

You too will have to minister to people who in your view hold erroneous doctrines or who flout ecclesiastical custom, but God has sent you to be the Shepherd of their souls. Stand up whenever the love and mercy of God are impugned, whatever the cost; teach with great patience; be gentle with an imperfect Church and do not drive others away from Christ either by the fierceness of your certainty, nor by the weakness of your confidence in what Jesus can do.

Follow the Holy Spirit in all things.

Wesley reluctantly submitted to “become more vile” and adopt open-air preaching because the practice was obviously blessed by the Holy Spirit. He formed his Methodist societies even in the face of opposition from his Anglican colleagues and superiors because his work was affirmed by the results and the apparent endorsement of the Holy Spirit.

Wesley saw his raising of the Methodist societies as an extraordinary work of the Holy Spirit that cut across the norms of Church procedures – therefore he felt he had to obey the Holy Spirit rather than ecclesiastical law.

Yet he would use the same criteria for expelling Methodists from his societies if they had lost their initial zeal and no longer manifested a Spirit-led life. What a temptation it must have been to boost his own name and keep in as many as possible to swell the ranks of his Methodists, but no, Wesley remained true to his principles: Signs of the Holy Spirit counted above all else – what he called, the life of holiness.

Wesley was passionate about doctrine, the Scriptures, Church tradition, the sacraments and all aspects of regular theological concern, but priority went to following the Holy Spirit’s lead. Where the Spirit was clearly at work, even beyond the reach of the established Church, Wesley was prepared to follow – just as Peter did at Cornelius’ house, or in today’s reading, when standing before the Samaritan believers.

Some Christians may take comfort in belonging to what they believe to be the true Church, or in believing what they believe to be the true faith, but what really counts is whether our hearts are right with God. We can debate theology, scriptural interpretations, ethical standards of behaviour, validity of church ministries and so forth – and important as those things are – the vital point is this – is your heart right with God?

Both ordinands and the gathered people of God are about to make some profound promises about our commitment to God, the Church and to one another. Those promises will be hollow words unless they touch not only our lips, but come also from our heart.

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