

I'm really delighted to be here today, both to share in worship with you all and to present Wendy with her Lay Preacher's certificate.

Having lay people authorised to preach is a practice that goes back to the very beginnings of the Methodist movement. Like so much of what John Wesley did or allowed to happen in those early years, it proved controversial. The Anglican clergy of the day were outraged at this challenge to their professional status by people they regarded as unlearned amateurs. Even Wesley himself had doubts about the practice.

There's a lovely story about the founder of Methodism descending in anger when he heard that one of his leaders had taken to preaching only to be confronted by his mother. She told him the man was as truly called by God to preach as he was and that he should listen to him and examine the fruits of his preaching. Wesley did so and was presumably impressed, concluding "It is the Lord, let Him do what seemeth Him good."

In fact Wesley had little choice but to accept the help of his lay preachers. In the 1740s the new Methodist movement was growing at such a rate that he desperately needed their assistance. He was also facing considerable pressure from the laity themselves: from stropky Methodist converts who wanted to share their experiences in faith with others and wouldn't be silenced. This movement from below also forced Wesley's hand and led him to modify his thinking and practice.

Over the years lay preaching has remained a vital and distinctive part of Methodism. Our lay preachers have continued to remind us that God's call is not confined to a special holy order of the ordained. The Spirit blows where it chooses and is known by its fruits. Our lay preachers have gone on faithfully proclaiming the gospel in places where it might not otherwise have been heard. Many of our parishes, rural and urban, wouldn't survive without their commitment. And our lay preachers have continued to bless their hearers with wonderful diverse gifts of passion, experience, intellect and integrity.

Looking back, I'm aware of the way my own faith has been hugely influenced by the lay preachers I've been privileged to know. There was the fiery fundamentalist who preached in the church I grew up in and who helped me decide what I didn't believe. Yet, for all his theological rigidity, he was a man who was also capable of astonishing moments of grace which taught me so much about what it really means to walk in the way of Christ.

When I began ministry in my first parish I was wonderfully supported by a man who'd been a lay preacher for sixty years. A retired schoolteacher, he was in his eighties and still loved to read, think and debate. I vividly remember him challenging my rather conservative congregation to move beyond their "Sunday school faith". That was something I'd never have dared to do at that stage of my ministry, but he did. He and his wife took me under their wing and gave me an example of a faith which never stands still.

And since coming to this Synod I've met a host of thoughtful, creative and at times stropky women who preach in churches around the Waikato and Bay of

Plenty. No names! Many of them travel long distances on Sundays to be with very small communities. Yet they seem endlessly energetic, imaginative and hopeful. I'm continually inspired by their generosity which challenges me to make my own faith more optimistic and more giving.

As I think back to all of the preachers I've heard over the years, I'm aware that I can't often remember the particular things they said. That's no reflection on them. It's just that with the passing of time their words have disappeared into the ether. However the thing I do remember is a sense of the way their sermons made me feel: everything from the frustration I experienced listening to the preacher of my youth to the enormous sense of excitement I felt when I later heard our new minister opening up the scriptures in a way that seemed full of new possibilities.

That points us to something really important about preaching. That is, that preaching isn't just about words, however clever or carefully-crafted. Words are important, but preaching - like faith itself - isn't just an experience of the mind. It's also an experience of the heart, where spirits are touched and transformed and drawn into a deeper relationship with God. Words can help that to happen, but, as most preachers know, the most effective sermon is the one we preach with our lives.

The English priest Harry Williams once said that he resolved that he would never speak about any aspect of Christian belief unless it had become part of his own life-blood. "For I realised", he said, "that the Christian truth I tried to proclaim would speak to those who listened only to the degree in which it was

an expression of my own identity.” There’s a real sense in which the message of any preacher is best conveyed not through words but through the example of their own lives and the way they seek to embody the truths they proclaim.

That’s a hard challenge. It’s a hard challenge for those of us who preach and it’s a hard challenge for all of us who in some way try to witness to our faith. Words, even wise words, aren’t enough. Our faith needs to be “not in what we say, but in who we are” and how we try to live.

Are we walking our talk? Are we staying true to who we say we are? Are we trying to live by the values we profess? And are we standing up for the things we believe in? That’s the proclamation we preach with our lives, the message that speaks the loudest, the witness that will touch people’s hearts and spirits in ways they will remember for the rest of their lives. As a former principal of the Methodist theological college used to say, truth is best conveyed by personality.

Wendy, that’s the challenge that’s before you as you take up the ministry of a lay preacher. It’s the challenge that’s before all of us as we seek to share our faith with others. What we say will never be as important as the person we are and the way we try to live. In the words of the psalmist: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” Amen.

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