

Tim Kelly's Ordination ...

... Messenger, Sentinel and Steward.

A sermon given at the Ordination of the Reverend Professor Tim Kelly, 18th October 2020, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Minster.

Isaiah 52:7-10; John 20:19-23

Well, Tim, last you've made it, despite the original date for this ordination in June being postponed; and despite a last minute panic when Joseph's class at school was sent home and told to self-isolate, meaning you've had to decamp to the Premier Inn for the last couple of nights; despite the best efforts of the pandemic to derail your ordination: you're here at last. Nothing, it seems, can override God's calling.

Now we just have to work out what it is you've been ordained to. Because you were at an ordination service in York Minster sixteen months ago; this isn't the first time you've been on the receiving end of a pair of bishop's hands. And indeed, there may be one or two here today wondering what's going on, apart from the candidate, that is: why are we ordaining him again? Did something go wrong the first time? Did it not take?

The answer, of course, is that in the Church of England, we have different ordinations for different kinds of ministry. There is the order of Deacon, which reminds the church of its calling to serve the world in the name of Christ, and that's what took place last year. And Tim, over this last year, you have shown your servant heart, your willingness to roll up your sleeves and get on with the mundane tasks of ministry. And we've appreciated your humility and the graciousness with which you have helped all of us digital dinosaurs to get to grips with the technical aspects of online ministry, which we've had to develop over the last few months. That practical ministry is a reminder to the whole church of the servant attitude that should be at our heart.

As well as deacons, the church also ordains bishops who have a particular ministry of leadership and oversight, watching over and caring for the Church of God. But Tim, let's not get ahead of ourselves - we're not quite there yet: today, you are being ordained as a priest. Not that you have left the diaconate behind, because you will always remain a deacon. But priesthood brings an extra dimension to your ministry. So what's that about? The Order of Service helpfully sets out some of the Church of England's understanding of the ordained priesthood. You'll find it set out on page eight. And the key phrase I want us all to think about is where it says priests 'are to be messengers, sentinels and stewards of

the Lord.' Those words may not immediately mean much to us in our day. A messenger conjures up an image of a courier on a motorbike. And if you Google 'Sentinel', the main thing that comes up is a space rocket; whilst a steward is just someone in a white jacket with a coffee pot or else one of those good folk who welcomed you into the minster this afternoon.

If we look at those in reverse order, in biblical times a *steward* was a kind of manager, but not in the modern sense of a corporate executive. It was more personal than that. A wealthy person would appoint a steward to manage their affairs, and a lot of faith was placed in a steward: they were trusted to look after family members; to manage the estate; to look after the finances; there was a sense in which they stood in the shoes of the owner himself. So Tim, God is calling you to be His steward; to stand in the place of Christ and to look after his people; He's entrusting you to manage the sacraments and the scriptures to deploy them to best effect; you are responsible for teaching the faith; for making sure the scriptures are known and taught and understood; you are to work at building up the church in unity and faith; and to administer the sacraments so that the worshipping life of the church is nourishing and the people are fed with the presence of Jesus himself, and are then able to reflect the pattern of his dying and rising, which is the pattern of love itself. In our gospel reading today, we see Jesus commissioning his disciples as stewards, as he breathed upon them the gift of his Holy Spirit and told them, as the Father has sent me, so I send you. Jesus, sends them out as his representatives to stand in his place and continue his own ministry; he entrusts them and you with his treasures, with the gospel message; with his people; and with his very presence. And it's his presence, the fact that you are ordained in the power of the Holy Spirit, which makes it possible for you to carry out this otherwise rather overwhelming trust.

I tend to think of a '*sentinel*' as a kind of guard or a lookout, someone you employed to keep an eye on things, to discourage thieves and intruders. A sentinel kept watch on the city wall and raise the alarm in the event of enemy attack. And I suppose there is still this defensive dimension to the priesthood in that the priest has to be ready to defend the church in the event of attacks on our faith from outside, or from harmful attitudes or behaviour from inside, either of which might threaten to undermine the church and lead it away from Christ. But in our first reading from Isaiah, we heard a much more positive view of the work of a sentinel: "Listen," says the prophet, "your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion." So it seems the Sentinel doesn't just stand on the city wall and look out for trouble in the form of

the advancing armies of the enemy. In time of siege, the eyes of the sentinels scan the horizon and strain to catch the first glimpse of the fluttering pennants; to catch the strains of the distant pipes; to look for the sunlight glinting on the helmets of the relief column coming to raise the siege. And priests are called to look for signs of God's presence in the world. Tim, you have your own story to tell, and you know that the Lord is there and that he is still at work within the world and you're calling now is to be on the lookout for signs of God at work in the lives of others; to help people discern the presence and activity of God; to find a language for their spiritual awareness and experience; to put a name to it. Jesus is surely present in every life, but much of the time he is unrecognised because no one has paid attention; no one has noticed or understood what the experience meant; or found a way to relate it to their pain or their struggle or to the rest of life.

And you are called to be, as it were, a 'singing sentinel', singing with joy when you discern the unmistakable signs of God's Holy Spirit at work in the world: wherever there is generosity in a world anxiously hoarding its resources; wherever there is forgiveness in a world marked by vindictiveness and mean mindedness; wherever there is hope and newness in a world full of cynicism and despair: - name it, as a sign of God's faithfulness; name it as a sign of the presence of Jesus; name it as evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit, and sing joyfully that the Lord is returning to Zion.

And finally, (yes, there is more) you are called to be a *messenger*. What kind of message are you to deliver?

A message, surely, of good news: it's a story-shaped message which tells us who we are and what we're here for; it's a story about a loving creator, an artist with a fine sense of beauty who loves and is deeply committed to what he has made; it's a story about you and me and how we have been made in order to enjoy life, not for ourselves, but in awareness and responsiveness to another; it's a story about the possibility of love and about one particular man whose life was so filled with awareness of the creator's love that death itself couldn't hold him; it's a story which has been told endlessly by some of the world's greatest artists and musicians, and you'll find it interpreted in art galleries and concert halls everywhere; it's a story whose themes are so powerful that dramatists and storytellers can't help but return to them continually, weaving afresh the warp and weft of forgiveness and redemption, of death and resurrection; it's a story retold in some of the world's greatest buildings, like this one, a cross-shaped building, referring to that story of self-giving love and sacrifice; it's a fantastic story and it's all around us in our world.

Amongst the many different narratives people embrace to give their lives meaning and identity, this one can still claim to be the greatest story ever told. And that's why Isaiah, in the first reading, sees God's messengers as having a high calling, 'How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns?" '

And that being so, it's a tragedy that so few people today are familiar with our good-news story and that many fail to be excited or inspired by it. Could it be that the problem lies not with the message, but with the messengers? Has the song gone flat because of the singer's performance? Have we somehow turned this beautiful tale of a love that never dies, into a dull and monotone recital?

We need priests who are messengers who can tell the story afresh in all its grandeur and life-changing power; we need priests who know this story from the inside because they have made it their own; we need priests who can sing the song for others and who can and who can conduct the whole people of God and invite everyone to be part of the chorus.

Tim, this is your message, your story, your calling. Go and tell it and be confident in the telling, because it is such good news. And so you are called to be a messenger, a sentinel and a steward of the Lord, and you bring with you all your many gifts and experiences: the church is much richer for having you amongst its priests.

So go, and take care to look after the treasures of the church; go, and sing for joy when you see the signs of God's kingdom breaking into the world; go, and tell afresh the wondrous tale of God's saving love; go, with our blessing and our love, and in the name of the father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Reading Texts

Isaiah 52:7-10

⁷ How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." ⁸ Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. ⁹ Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. ¹⁰ The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

John 20:19-23

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."