

Ordination Sermon – Ali Boulton

July 4th, 2009

Today is a day of great celebration, a festival day, as we gather to support Ali as she is ordained to the ministry of word and sacrament.

It's a great day, a solemn day because some weighty promises have been made by her and by us, and a day when again we hear the story of how God's love is being outworked in Ali's life - but it's much more than that. Today we connect into the story of God's love being outworked in all of life, in all of creation. It's that specific and it's that big. And we're here to celebrate it.

And our readings today help us to do that as they tell us huge things about the character of God who has led us to this moment in this place today. We learn from the prophet Isaiah about a God who creates, who forms, who shapes, who redeems broken places and people, and who knows them all by name. About a God who when life gets tough and overwhelming and when suffering is known will never leave us but will walk with us through the darkest places and bleakest moments; About a God who thinks it important enough to let us know that God is passionate about us, passionate about the world, passionate that the world should work in the way that God intended it to work – and that he doesn't sit on the sidelines empty longing for the brokenness of the world to be mended, but gets his hands dirty by

getting involved in the world's life in order to heal it, transform it and make it whole.. 'See,' he says, 'I'm about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, can you not perceive it?' In the middle of all that is wrong, God works to make a brand new future infused with new possibilities. That's a huge vision. And we're given a small picture of it in this reading from Isaiah – *wild animals will honour me, the jackals and ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.'*

The things we're most afraid of will be stripped of their power to harm and give honour to God; and places known for being dry, arid and sterile where there is no life will be the places where fresh, energising invigorating, cleansing water will be found. I am about to do a new thing, he says.

Infact, God's passion is so great, so intense, so overwhelming, that he doesn't simply leave us with rules to live by that we can never really attain, or a list of empty practices that we need to do – the passion of God means that God himself comes to the world in Jesus – God incarnated in the world – and in Jesus shows us how to truly live, how to be fully human, how to build authentic, healthy relationships with each other; how the values held in God's heart can be expressed in our daily lives and shape them in ways that lead to life in all its fullness. And at the very beginning of the ministry of Jesus, we read from Luke's gospel this glorious manifesto – those key concerns which will shape his ministry, revealing as they do the

passion of God. And this manifesto turns the world on its head – it gives the poor and marginalised – that is those who have no voice, no visibility, no privilege, no power - a place of great importance as the hearers and holders of God's good news! And that good news for them is that in God's vision for the world, there is justice for all people – and the poor and marginalised will be at the heart of that new world – filled, satisfied, whole. This manifesto talks about a world where those held hostage in any way – maybe imprisoned by unjust governments, or held captive by addictions and habits will be released and will know true freedom – which is an attribute of this new world. The blind – those whose ability to truly see – either physically or because of a failure of their imagination and inability to perceive truth – will be given sight! And those oppressed by others, or by those devastating demons of self doubt and lack of self worth will be liberated. And haven't we just seen that deep human yearning expressed on the streets of Tehran in recent days.

Now this picture of God's vision for the world is often referred to in the Bible as the kingdom of God – a place where things are working as they should be working, where people live in good and healthy relationships with each other, a place where children are raised without fear but in fullness, a place where the elderly are respected and listened to and cared for with gratitude, a place where work (which is actually a gift of God) is satisfying and builds up the common good, a place where creation works well and in harmony with every other bit of it – this vision, this kingdom is a place of peace and fullness, with our passionate creator God right there at the heart

of it, knitting it all together with a powerful love. And the Bible doesn't talk about the kingdom as if it's somewhere else, some other place that we'll only know on death – the Bible talks about that kingdom as being a social reality – somewhere that we can know now – maybe not in its fullness, not quite yet, that's to come, but we can know it and live by its values now. And the invitation of Jesus to follow him – which is a refrain through so much of the gospels – is an invitation to follow him in the building up of that kingdom. 'Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness' he said, 'and all these things will be added to you.'

Now it can be hard to fully take on board what that might look like in the world. And it's hard because so many messages we hear are about the huge problems affecting the world – climate change, economic meltdown, consequence of human greed throughout history, the continuation of wars, the breakdown of family, and so on. And these are real problems that we dare not turn our faces from because these are among the dark places which break the heart of God. But the vision of God for the world, helps us to see things in a different way, to picture an alternative way of thinking and of working. Now, when we think about 'issues' we can be overwhelmed – they're too big and too intractable. But we are told of a God in Christ who showed us how to work out the big things by dealing with the smaller ones – in the healing of a blind beggar whose name we know is Bartimaeus, or the healing and restoration of a woman cast out of her community because she has been bleeding for 12 years contravening purity laws, and been fleeced by those who claimed

they could help her; in the calming of storms and the removal of fear;, in the feeding of 5,000 people with freely shared bread and fish, or the feeding of his close companions with bread and with wine – ordinary things given to remember him by; in speaking truth to power in his encounters with moribund authorities; in sharing good news with everyday men and women through excellent story telling; but God being God worked on the big issues too - in the overturning of violence as a response to anything supremely on the cross – to which he was sent by a world unwilling to take the risk of living fully in accordance with the vision of God, where the brokenness and wastefulness and darkness and our wilful manipulations were carried by him on our behalf; and in a death and a rising to life which made possible the redemption of all of us, created, formed, shaped and named, by the Creator God.

And what's amazing about this story is that God, in his immensity and awesomeness, in an intense love for us that is beyond anything we have known, wants to work with each of us, our names known to him, as we allow the new things he's doing, new futures taking shape, new communities being built, to be embodied in us. Because that's the way that God did it.

Today we celebrate that story and that hope – it's a big picture. And God in all grace has called Ali to be involved with him in the shaping and outworking of that vision in her life and the life of the world. It's an awesome and holy calling. And Ali, and those also known to God who are working with her, are to embody this kingdom and share its good

news in the way of Christ right now in this brand new community in Wichelstowe. See, says God, I am doing a new thing, can you not perceive it? And that new thing is being done in Ali as all of her life experience – as daughter, sister, wife, mother, teacher, church worker – together with brand new God-given gifts will be brought to bear in this exciting and probably terrifying new venture.

Ali, God has given you immense gifts and abilities, a sharp mind, a gentle wisdom and a great gift for listening to and talking with people. He has given you a passion for the kingdom and a courageous heart which has led you to a place where you and your family are being asked to take huge risks. And you've said yes to all that! The love of God for you means that God does not leave you to face all that dependent on your own power or ability. All the experience you've had is informative but not determinative, all the knowledge you have is useful but not central; all the training, excellent as it has been of course, is helpful but not pivotal; for when we get involved in the work of God and follow Christ into the world we need more than that. God recognises our need of him – and has given to you the gift of his Spirit which rests on you and lives in you and is all you need to do what God asks of you. So as you wake up every morning let the question be 'Right God, what shall we do today?' And the Spirit will lead you and guide you – will surprise you and astonish you – will comfort and strengthen you. Know that – for you are sealed with the Spirit of God. In this new venture, this new thing that God is doing in you and in Wichelstowe, keep close to Jesus and keep the people

close to Jesus, and our prayer for you and for the community is God,
let your kingdom come!

Amen.