

Sermon for the 20th Anniversary of the ordination of women as priests in Nippon Sei Ko Kai.

／ The Revd Canon Terrie Robinson

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Place: St Andrew's Cathedral, Diocese of Tokyo.

Theme: Sing a new song to the Lord

Readings: Isaiah 35.1-10; Psalm 96; Revelation 21.1-7; John 8.28-32

It is an honour and a privilege to be with you today as we celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ordination of women to the priesthood, here in NSKK. You have come a long way since Margaret Yoshiko Shibukawa was ordained priest in December 1998. I am deeply grateful to Archbishop Nathaniel and to the Women's Desk, and to all those who have been involved with the invitation that was sent to me, and for the wonderful welcome and hospitality that has been extended to me since my arrival in Japan. Thank you!

We are celebrating today and looking with hopeful and joyful anticipation to the future. But we are also remembering the journey that brought us here.

Women have always played a vital role in the story of our Christian faith but it would seem that they can easily be forgotten or overlooked. In 1980, my own Church, the Church of England, chose for the first time to remember in its liturgical calendar people who had lived during its own lifetime, in other words, since the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Among the twenty British people chosen, just one woman was included – that was Josephine Butler, a social reformer in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who played a major role in improving conditions for women, especially destitute women, in education and public health. She was only accepted as one of the list of people to be remembered, after she had been rejected on the first vote!

The *official* explanation given for this extraordinary gender imbalance in the list of people chosen for the liturgical calendar, was that inadequate records had been kept of the lives of other women who might have deserved commemoration. *Unofficially*, the Chair of the Committee responsible for gathering names said that the disparity arose because conduct that was regarded as sanctity in men had often been regarded as insanity in women!

We are celebrating the ordination of women today and we can look to the future with confidence and optimism. We can dare to sing a new song to the Lord with gladness and with joy. But we must also remember where we have come from. Women are now serving as priests alongside their brothers in Christ, but we have come from a place of exile, a place

where we were not permitted to serve God fully as witnesses, as vessels of Christ for the world.

The women priests who are here today are the pioneers; they are women who have broken new ground. I hope sincerely that future generations of priests will remember them and will remember their stories. I hope that they, and we, will remember that we were once outsiders, that we have come from a place of exile, because this will help us to understand the experience of any individual who is classed by others as an 'outsider'. This will help us to stand in solidarity with any community in our world that is pushed to the margins.

The story of God's people is a story of exile. It's a story of people singing their song in a strange land, of people longing to return to their homeland and yearning for a time of joy and gladness when there is no more sorrow and sighing. This is part of our DNA; it is part of who we are.

Our text from the prophet Isaiah today is an announcement to a people in exile in Babylon, people who had been forcibly deported from the ancient kingdom of Judah after the destruction of Jerusalem. The prophet's announcement is full of hope and encouragement: the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom, and blossom abundantly. 'Be strong', says the prophet. 'Do not fear.'

'Do not fear!' We have come from a place of exile, but we still hear those words echoing through the Scriptures and across the centuries. 'Do not fear!' - this was Gabriel's greeting to a bewildered Mary, before her life was changed forever. It was also the angel's message to the grieving women at the empty tomb, before they hurried away to become the first evangelists: 'Do not fear ... Go quickly and tell'.

In all our Churches around the Anglican Communion, changes in practice, including steps towards women's ordination, have often been accompanied by anxiety and fear. When the Holy Spirit comes nudging and prodding us, it can be painful.

During my years as Director for Women in Church & Society at the Anglican Communion Office, it has been my experience that the topic of gender justice often leads to feelings of fear, or even of threat, because any work towards gender justice has the potential for radical transformation. Whenever the status quo is challenged, people are fearful of loss. They might feel that 'we will lose everything that we believed in'. The way to a new way of thinking and living can feel profoundly unfamiliar, threatening and dislocating.

As Christians, we know that deep human transformation requires a willingness to be vulnerable, to let go of old certainties so that we are able to grasp what is new and full of

possibility.

You may know the story of the small child who was playing on a beach, collecting shells. There were shells everywhere, and the little boy picked up as many as he could and in the end both his hands were full. Then he saw that the sea had washed up a starfish, a beautiful extraordinary starfish. The little boy wanted to pick up the starfish but both his hands were full of shells. He looked round at his father with a look almost of grief on his face. He so wanted to pick up the beautiful, extraordinary starfish, but his hands were full of shells and he didn't want to let them go...

Sometimes we need to let go of old ways of thinking and behaving - ways which have trapped us in culturally accepted patterns of domination and subordination - so that we are free to discover and grasp 'the truth that shall make us free'. We will be free people when we are liberated from all the mythologies and distorted theologies around power that keep us locked into our anxieties and ambitions. We will be free people when we root our lives in the generous, reconciling, humanising and empowering love of God.

Sarah Bachelard, who is a priest and theologian in the Anglican Church of Australia, has asked the question, 'What can we do when this work of transformation is refused and resisted?'

She says, 'The temptation is to become either cynical and withdrawn or anxious and ever more frenzied in our activism. When the need is so urgent – women and children trafficked daily into slavery; gender-based violence in epidemic proportions; women disproportionately affected by climate change, unjust legal, trade and macroeconomic frameworks, and profoundly discriminated against economically and in access to decision making ... – then despair or anxiety are natural reactions. Yet, to paraphrase Jesus, we believe that "it shall not be so among us". The deep work of justice and reconciliation in which we are invited to participate, is God's work. We are called to yield ourselves to whole-hearted, intelligent and costly participation in this work, but without anxiety or frenzy. We are to be prophetic but not reactive, our fierce love growing in the soil of prayer, listening, and discernment.'

'Do not fear!'. Our Christian faith teaches us that God loves everything God has made, and that we are, each one, equally made in the image of God. Jesus never hesitated to work with women, or to empower them as agents of his Gospel. Jesus went to the places where women were. He met the Samaritan woman and conversed with her at a well, the place where women gathered. After their encounter, the Samaritan woman ran back to her village as an evangelist, 'Come and see, come and see, I think this may be the Messiah'. And they did come and see!

The sisters Mary and Martha were among Jesus' closest friends. Remember how Jesus encouraged Mary to sit and listen to his teaching along with his male disciples. This was just one example of how Jesus transgressed the deeply held social and gender norms of his time.

Jesus taught parables in which women serve as metaphors for God. Remember the woman who lost one of her ten coins, who searched until she found it, and then rejoiced.

Jesus healed women and restored their dignity. When the woman with haemorrhage touched his cloak, Jesus said, 'Daughter, *your* faith has made you well'. This woman had been ostracised, marginalised, for years because the society she lived in – the culture around her – deemed her to be less than respectable. And the woman was not only healed as a result of her encounter with Jesus, but she was empowered. He made sure that the woman knew that she herself had the capacity to act and change her circumstances; 'Daughter, *your* faith has made you well'.

Jesus healed Jairus' daughter, a 12 year-old girl. 'Talitha cum', he said. 'Little girl, arise.'

The Good News is that in Christ all things are already being made new. The Good News is that in Christ, every person is set free, every woman, man, girl and boy is set free, to rise up beyond physical limitations, beyond cultural ignorance, beyond political and social structures, to be fully human and to respond to God's call to engage actively with the work that Jesus has already begun.

I can assure you that many Anglicans around the Communion are rejoicing with you today. I hope many more women will follow in the footsteps of the pioneer women who have been ordained in NSKK over the past 20 years. But whether ordained or lay, it is open to each one of us, whoever we are, to discover what gives us life and purpose, and to discern how to offer that to the glory of God and to God's mission in the world.

Do not fear! Dare to sing a new song to the Lord! Dare to let go, and dance to a different tune! Amen.

(Prayer) Holy God, You send your Holy Spirit to encourage and disturb us, and to stir up in us the gifts which you endow. As we step into the future, take away our fear and anxieties; give us time for the task you have entrusted to us, peace for the pathway, wisdom for the work, friends along the way, and love to the last. In Jesus' name, Amen.