

Sermon for Called Together, by Claire Bampton

A service to celebrate the ministry of all God's people in the Diocese of Leicester

Leicester Cathedral, Saturday 18 May 2024

So... Lay Ministers. People who "do" Lay Ministry. What is that?

Well perhaps we need to start with what it's not. It's certainly not being asked to be a "cheap vicar". It's not simply about completing a training course. It's not really about posh bits of paper telling you that the Bishop's given you permission for something! It's not about putting some people on a special church pedestal, or expecting particular individuals to do all the things that nobody else wants or has time to do.

So now we're clear on all that – what is it exactly that we're doing here? Well – this is "a service to celebrate the ministry of all God's people in the Diocese of Leicester". This is about being "**Called Together**".

So, I wonder, what does it feel like to be called? Perhaps that's a very personal question – each of us will have our own experience. Perhaps for you it's clear as day, a conviction that you can't shake off that simply feels right, and feels somehow "of God". Perhaps you've been blessed with that clarity and surety. Perhaps it's not like that at all... perhaps it's a bit confusing, a bit daunting, a bit surprising, even a bit overwhelming.

Perhaps you feel a bit more like the **disciples in that locked room**. Come with me, into that story in John's Gospel for a few moments...

It's all been a complete disaster. This great guy, who seemed so in control, us disciples have given up so much in our lives to follow him, we've listened to him speak and teach, we like the sound of this new Kingdom we keep going on about, we've felt that something intangible in his presence that's kept us hooked in, we've caught the vision. But ever so quickly the story's changed direction, trouble had been brewing but now it has erupted and Jesus had been beaten, humiliated and killed. Us disciples, we're confused, scared, overwhelmed to such an extent that even Peter's renounced him - no, no, nothing to do with me. But we've been identified, they know we were with Jesus, we're guilty by association (not quite sure what we're guilty of exactly, but whatever it is, it's not going to work out well for us). What on earth do we do now.

Was it all just an illusion? Was there really nothing more to these last few years than this man's ideas and stories. Surely not – it felt so real, so important. And it still feels as though there's something going on here. But we don't understand. He didn't give us a plan. And of course, Mary's just been trying to tell us this ridiculous tale that she's met the dead Jesus outside his tomb! Who does that woman think she is?! What on earth is that about. Impossible. Clearly, they've moved his body somewhere – goodness knows why. Again – unlikely to be a good sign. Better hide away together, lock the doors so they can't get us.

Let's try and work out what we do next. Can't just walk back into our old lives... can't stay in here forever...

And then there's that moment. Jesus came and stood among them. And he simply says, **"Peace be with you"**. The disciples start to get it... it really is him. He was dead... now he's alive – we've seen the marks of crucifixion on his hands and feet. Mary was right after all.

So, what now. What's the plan? What's Jesus going to do next?

"as the Father has sent me, so I send you"

Those disciples he had called by name during his earthly ministry, he now sends out. And through his breath, he gifts to them the Holy Spirit.

Called and Sent. Not with a plan or a to do list, but **called to be with Jesus, and sent to be in the world**. Those disciples had the advantage of Jesus literally standing in front of them and speaking to them. For us today, that's perhaps a bit less likely. For each of us, we hear that calling in different ways. There may be people around us who speak it to us. Who see something within us, who are prompted by God to suggest a calling we might explore, who encourage us to see and understand ourselves in new ways. Perhaps you've had someone alongside you who has done this for you. Perhaps you have been, or could be, that person who walks alongside others. A sense of calling might emerge from your regular prayer and bible study as a wondering or possibility, perhaps as a series of "coincidences", or subtle signs along the way. Sometimes we might just sort of practically fall into doing things already, and it's on reflection that we identify the thing we might consider a calling.

However, that calling first finds it's way into your consciousness, underneath it all, the **Holy Spirit is tugging at the very centre of your soul**. There's something about it that feels so right, such an imperative, whether exciting or daunting. And it just won't let go.

Today we celebrate with this particular group of people who come to publicly commit, before God, to following a calling to Associate Ministry. They'll go back to their respective churches and communities, and I wonder what will be **different** following this service?

Well, I'd like to suggest that in some ways, absolutely nothing! The callings we are about to affirm, are as unique as the individuals here today. As Jesus sent those disciples, he didn't give them a role description, or a list of tasks, and even as much as I personally love a complex spreadsheet, he didn't present them with a matrix of outputs and outcomes and targets for growth or new converts or people blessed through social action.

Because the **doing** flows out of the **being**. Yes, there will be things that you are called to do. But that's because those things are rooted in your calling to be, more fully than you can imagine is possible, to be that unique and loved, flawed and beautiful person that God has made you to be. That is your ministry.

And although Jesus didn't give them or us a direction of things to do, he did and does equip us to follow our calling. **We are equipped simply with the Breath of God.**

Breathing is a funny thing, don't you think. It's one of those essential things about how our bodies work that keeps us alive. While seeming so simple, there's a complex web of things going on inside us. Deep within our brains, there's a respiratory drive written into our neural pathways that ensures our gentle rhythm of breathing in and out, and in and out.

Those unconscious neural signals instruct the muscles around our ribs and the diaphragm to contract and relax, creating the space in our lungs that pulls in fresh air and releases carbon dioxide. Within the intricate sponginess of the lungs, tiny little bubbles of alveoli are enabling those oxygen and carbon dioxide particles to move between the air and our blood, helping to make sure that every cell of our body has what it needs in order to play its particular part in keeping us healthy and functioning.

And then there's our sensory system, receiving information about what's going on around us and within us, so that it can adjust that rhythm of breathing to be exactly how deep or fast we need it to be. And then there's our higher brain function that enables us to hold our breath, or take an extra deep breath when we consciously want to.

The **Holy Spirit breathes in and through each of us**. The Spirit helps us to sustain patterns of prayer and study of scripture that establish our rhythm of life. The Spirit infuses our lives with the love and energy of God, seeping into every nook and cranny of our being, providing us with nourishment and enabling us to let go of those things that weigh us down. The Spirit guides us to notice what is going on around us, prompting our empathy and compassion for those we encounter near and far. And the Spirit gives us freedom to choose how to respond to our calling, as faithful disciples, each moment, each day. And when things go wrong, or we find ourselves having strayed away or simply weighed down by weariness or fear, the Spirit lifts us up and pulls us back into the Father's loving arms.

And so now, for those being licenced today and each one of us here today,

"I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." Ephesians 3:16-19

Amen.