

I heard you had some bad news last week. My daughter Emily came home and told me. She was concerned about how I was going to lead the service this week. "Mum", she said, "you need to be encouraging". Well, my aim this morning is to be encouraging, but also pragmatic.

I remember before I was ordained, meeting a young woman who was an Anglican nun. She lived in an order of her and five elderly women, and increasingly her vocation was to act as a care assistant to the others. I was talking to her about her life and vocation, and asked why she had decided to commit herself to a situation where it would seem that in only a few years she would be the sole member. She told me that she had prayed about it and thought for a long time before making her vows. And she had come to the conclusion that in order for her to join the order, she had to be certain that even if she were the only person left in the world, that it was still what God wanted her to do.

It made a big impression on me at the time, because I too was struggling with the thought of being ordained. I was going to give up a good career, where people in my field knew and respected me, where increasingly I was being asked to undertake consultancy work for other countries, where I was somebody and had the authority and freedom to determine my work patterns and how I went about things. And now God was calling me to be an Episcopal priest, in a tiny denomination of mainly small congregations, where I had to pledge obedience to my Bishop and follow a whole set of rules. Being ordained is no longer either a cushy job or one with status in the world. But this young nun's words made me go back to God and pray until I knew that even if I were the last priest standing, with no congregation left, then I was still called to be ordained. And I have to say, since I've been ordained I've experienced more freedom and joy in my role than I could ever have imagined before.

But at the same time the world is changing fast. Just think of the changes that have taken place within your lifetime. It's no longer normal to go to church on a Sunday. And our numbers are getting smaller. And so we are challenged – is following Jesus the thing we feel called to do, no matter what?

The Israelites were called to follow rules in order to be seen by others as a people distinctive from everyone else; pointing to the LORD God – Yahweh – in a world of many other gods. God promised to be their God, but also gave a promise of blessings and curses – blessing when they were following the rules and living as the people of God, cursing when they stepped away from following God and went their own way. Here in Deuteronomy this morning, Moses has been told that he won't get to cross the Jordan because the people have strayed away from God yet again. Instead, it will be Joshua who will lead them over. That must have been a huge blow to Moses. He's pleaded with God but to no avail. And now he's got to bring the people back on message, knowing that he himself is not going to benefit.

In Mark's Gospel we see the huge cultural change that Jesus brought in. I always want to sympathise with the Pharisees and Scribes – after all, aren't there many stories in the Bible where you can see yourself as one of them instead of on the side of Jesus? Especially at the moment where we are struggling under the weight of ever-changing rules and regulations. It seems eminently sensible to wash your hands before eating, to wash food in a time before pre-packaging, and make sure that the utensils you use are clean. Just in the same way that we sanitise our hands, follow social distancing measures, and use face coverings. A rabbi who didn't follow these rules, and even encouraged his followers to also disregard their tradition, must have created deep feelings of disgust and uncleanness amongst the religious leaders.

But actually the issue was far more political and religious than one of hygiene. As Tom Wright points out, it was the question of who speaks for God today? Morna Hooker explains that at the start, it had only been necessary for priests to wash before eating food which had been offered in sacrifice. However, over time this became a rule for all lay people, since all food should be regarded as having been offered in the Temple. Washing utensils comes from Leviticus, where cleansing was needed in case any of the articles had come into contact with those who were unclean. When the pharisees look with disgust at the disciples, it is the idea of not keeping themselves separate from those who are considered unclean, rather than any notion of germs.

In this and other ways, the Pharisees had used scripture over time to build up political arguments – such as encouraging the people to revolt against the Romans – as well as creating hard boundaries between their people and those who were not Jewish. Jesus's way of behaving – of announcing that the Kingdom of God was being ushered in through eating with outcasts, or healing, and that those on the margins were being brought into this new Kingdom - was a direct political challenge as well as a religious one. It was a new hermeneutic. The purity laws which had been given way back in the Old Testament, and which acted to make the people a distinctive signpost to God, were now redundant because Jesus had arrived. Everything in the scriptures was pointing to the Messiah, and that had now come in the form of Jesus. The deeper truth is now revealed, but that meant that the signposting which came before was no longer necessary. Jesus was and is the fulfilment of the Hebrew scriptures. This was no longer a time of follow the rules and be blessed. As we were to find out after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, it was about the Holy Spirit working inside you, changing you from within and behaviour coming out of a response to God's love and acceptance of you.

All well and good. But how does that relate to where we find ourselves today? We as Church together are Jesus' hands and feet. We should be a diverse but distinctive group of people, pointing towards Jesus as showing who God is. But if we're honest it is so easy to create rules, and for these to become ends in themselves. And it doesn't matter which denomination you belong to – it seems to be an expression of our human-ness. In our culture it becomes easier and easier to fear for the future, to engage in the polemic arguments all around us, or just to withdraw and become isolated. For the focus to become on 'my relationship with God', rather than us as a collective family of brothers and sisters.

And yet we are called to live within the tension. Not to give up. To partner with each other and with God to help bring in God's reign.

I will leave you with a story. My daughter sat in your service last week. And during your service she had a vision of the walls dissolving and trees growing up into a forest cathedral. Flowers started blooming, and when she looked down her arms were becoming flowers. And she saw God there, with all the forest blooming and flourishing.

Now, I tell you this – one, because it happened, and my daughter is not subject to visions at all. Only time will tell what it was. But secondly, - this was a 21 year old who sat in one of your services and had a powerful connection with God. And that for me is the amazing encouragement. God's Spirit is working in Edinburgh. You are an amazing witness to Jesus here in the city. Things might look different in the future, but you are being used to point to God through Jesus. And maybe, as you lean into God, as you listen and discern, and pray, and fear I pray that, as St Paul said, you may have power, with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and how long and high and deep is the love of God, and to know this love that

surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fulness of God. Amen.