

**Sermon given at the induction of Rev Jordan Redding by Professor Murray Rae at Knox Church on Thursday 9 July 2020. Isaiah 40: 6-15, 27-31 and Matt 12: 9-21**

We have come this evening to worship God, and, within that context, to induct Jordan Redding to the positions of Associate Minister at Knox Church and Chaplain at the University of Otago and Otago Polytechnic. We have come as well to recognise Olivia Dawson's transition from part-time to full-time chaplaincy at the University and at the Polytechnic.

We ought to consider then what it is that a minister does – in the context of a church congregation, or as a chaplain in a tertiary educational institution. What is the task of Christian ministry that we are calling upon Jordan and Olivia to undertake?

We have read this evening from the book of Isaiah and from the Gospel of Matthew. Jordan and Olivia, I invite you to consider with me what insight these two texts might offer into the nature of Christian ministry. The texts speak of two roles that are at the core of Christian ministry, the prophetic and the pastoral.

Let's take a look first at the reading from Isaiah. In chapter 40, a portion of which was read earlier, we are dealing with second Isaiah, a prophet in the same tradition as the original Isaiah, son of Amoz who exercised his prophetic vocation in the mid 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. Second Isaiah so-called – we don't actually know his name – lived a couple of centuries later at the time of Israel's exile in Babylon. Second Isaiah looks forward to his people's release from servitude and their return to Jerusalem. He lives in the midst of difficult times. He and his people were living as refugees in exile. They had been driven from their homeland by the marauding forces of an invading army. They had seen their city laid waste and their beloved temple destroyed. The familiar lament of the Psalmist gives voice to Israel's distress:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down  
And there we wept as we remembered Zion.

In the midst of Israel's hardship, its servitude, and its despondency, the prophet hears a voice which says, 'Cry out!' And the prophet answered, 'What shall I cry?'

That is a good place to begin as we consider what it is to be a minister in a church, or a chaplain in a tertiary institution. A voice says, Cry out! It is God's voice, and the prophet responds, 'What shall I cry?' This is the place to start, Olivia and Jordan, as you consider what is involved in the task before you.

Christian ministry has no legitimacy whatsoever except as a response to God's call. It has no foundation and nothing to be getting on with unless those who seek to be ministers have first listened for the voice of God. Cry out says that voice. Cry out for my people. Cry out in protest, wherever there is affliction and injustice, cry out words of comfort, cry out words of hope. Christian ministry gets underway as a response to this call of God.

Second Isaiah has begun that task already... To his people in servitude and exile the prophet says,

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her  
that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,

And further,

‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.  
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’

We have heard these words echo down through the ages, promising a time when justice will be done, promising that those who live in the valleys of deprivation will be raised up, and those who live on the mountains of privilege and indifference will be brought low.

We have heard these words spoken in desperation in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. We have heard them declared from the pulpits of South Africa, to a people groaning under the burdens of apartheid. We have heard them ring out from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial as Martin Luther King spoke to the world of his dream that the day would come when his people would be free at last. And we have heard them, or words like them, from prophets in our own land – from Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Tūruki, from Te Whiti o Rongomai, from Tahūpotiki Wiremu Ratana.

To be a minister, or a chaplain, is to be a steward of this prophetic tradition. It should be obvious to anyone who reads a newspaper, or listens to the news today, that we have need of such prophetic words still. Jordan and Olivia, it is your job to be servants of this Word of God. It is your job to listen for God’s voice, and then to cry out wherever there is need of justice, of comfort, and of hope.

‘What shall I cry?’, the prophet asks. We read on to discover a second theme:

All people are grass,  
their constancy is like the flower of the field.  
The grass withers, the flower fades,  
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;  
surely the people are grass.  
The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the word of our God will stand for ever.

The prophet speaks now of our fragility. We are like grass that will wither, and like a flower that fades. It is true. We are but a tiny speck in the immensity of things, a fleeting moment in the vast expanse of time. Another Psalm comes readily to mind:

‘When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established, [O Lord];  
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?’

On the face of it, and by all reasonable calculation, our existence in the universe is little more than a flash in the pan, and a fairly dim one at that. The prophet says what is true, and then he contrasts the fragility and the fleetingness of human existence with the constancy, the wisdom, and the immensity of God.

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand  
and marked off the heavens with a span,  
enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure,  
and weighed the mountains in scales  
and the hills in a balance?

Who has directed the spirit of the Lord,  
or as his counsellor has instructed him?  
Whom did he consult for his enlightenment,  
and who taught him the path of justice?

Who taught him knowledge,  
and showed him the way of understanding?  
Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket,  
and are accounted as dust on the scales;  
see, he takes up the isles like fine dust.

It is the work of the prophet, and the work of ministers and chaplains, to help us understand things aright, to get things in proper perspective. It is the task of servants of the Word to dissuade us from pride and pretentiousness, but also to be present and attentive in those moments when people become overwhelmed by their fragility and by their frailty.

It is in the midst of those moments that the prophet has something more to say:

See, the Lord God comes ...  
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep...

And then a little later:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
The Lord is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He does not faint or grow weary;  
his understanding is unsearchable.  
He gives power to the faint,  
and strengthens the powerless.

Our frailty and our fragility are real, they are a part of our human condition, but the one who sets the stars in the heavens, who gives life to all things, and who made us to live in communion with him gathers his flock like a shepherd, and holds each one like a lamb in his arms.

Jordan and Olivia, you are stewards of this mystery; you are bearers of the news that the Lord gives power to the faint, strengthens the powerless, and gives rest to the heavy-laden. This too is news to which you are to bear witness as you go about your work.

We turn finally to the reading from Matthew's gospel. The reading began with a brief report of Jesus healing a man on the sabbath, only to be lambasted by the keepers of the law who had fixated upon the law's letter and completely missed its spirit. To be sure, the sabbath was instituted so that we might refrain from work and take a rest from our labours. That need for rest, for recreation, for restoration, was thought important enough to be included as one of the commandments. But in the hands of some bad theologians, the commandment had become a straitjacket, a burdensome instrument of constraint, rather than a specification of the freedom and the shalom, that God intends for his creatures.

Jesus got it, of course. He healed people on the Sabbath, not just once, but repeatedly. What better use of the sabbath could there be than to heal people of their afflictions and release them from their bondage? Olivia and Jordan, don't be bad theologians. Be followers of Jesus, the one who comes to set us free, and release us into the fullness of life that God intends for us.

The second segment in our reading from Matthew's gospel, is a citation taken straight from the text of second-Isaiah, only now the words are applied to Jesus himself.

'Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,  
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.  
I will put my Spirit upon him,  
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.  
He will not wrangle or cry aloud,  
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.  
He will not break a bruised reed  
or quench a smouldering wick  
until he brings justice to victory.  
And in his name the Gentiles will hope.'

Olivia and Jordan, we are calling you tonight to undertake Christian ministry in this congregation and in this city's tertiary institutions. But it isn't really your ministry. The ministry to which you are called is the ministry of Christ; it is the ministry of the one whom God has anointed to proclaim justice, to offer comfort, to bring hope. You are called to share Christ's ministry, to share in the work of him who comes among us as a servant in order to bring to fruition the promise of God that the creature shall have life and have it abundantly.

This is the task to which you are called, in company with Jesus. We promise that we will pray for you.

Amen.