



7 February 2016
Quinquagesima
Choral Evensong
Isaiah 52 vv. 1–10
Ephesians 4 vv. 1–16

Holy Orders: Watching and Enabling

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One of the lessons that I learnt from my Director of Studies when I was a student here in Cambridge was the importance of walking the streets and looking up at the buildings. He was an historical geographer, interested in origins, and in order to do that he suggested that you have to look up at the architecture of the buildings to see the layers of social history which they reveal. His was a call to patient and attentive looking and he was deeply bemused by the modern habit of rushing everywhere without such gazing. John Ruskin, after whom Anglia Ruskin University takes its name, coined a phrase that to look is to begin to learn how to read. He was amongst other things a painter and another close observer of life with the radical addition that he observed in order also to read the deeper signs of what life was about. In his case, the ways in which the Industrial Revolution not only opened up opportunities for people to progress but brought with it social injustices that needed to be transformed. Looking in this case is a gateway into a whole world of learning, discovery and indeed of radical change both for the viewer and for the world which we view.

In our reading from Isaiah this evening, we have a picture of people watching and looking. The sentinels on the city wall are the people who watch, often to spot the danger of an attacking army but also those who watch in order to open gates, to offer hospitality, to see what is going on. The picture here is located within a time of deep hopelessness for the people of Israel where their heads were literally down because of the despair of exile, of fruitless endeavour and of a world that misunderstood them. So into this scenario, God announces the promise of a future that will be different, renewed, one that is marked especially by the word peace and God calls God's people to wake up to this new reality. The sentinels are to watch, see and then announce that good news. Whilst the history of realising this promise has taken a great time to work its way out, the image here of watching for signs of God's presence is something that resonates throughout the scriptures. God is pictured often as one who watches over us, our coming in and going out. Jesus' disciples were asked to watch for signs of the fig tree budding as something that would show the coming of God's kingdom and in the Acts of the Apostles, the same image is used as one of care and oversight for new Christian communities.

Tonight we continue a series of sermons on the sacraments and I want to suggest that this picture of watching encapsulates, amongst many images that might be used, the way that ordained women and men are to be and to do. For it immediately places who we are and what we do into a different horizon. It places it firstly into the horizon of what God is doing. If ministry is about anything, it is about helping people to spot what God is doing and to join in with that. Whilst it is plain that Christian faith is based upon the announcement of good news especially that shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is an announcement of what God is already doing, has done and will continue to do. We are caught up in something much bigger than ourselves, in God's capacity to be present and active in our world. And that is the other horizon that this image of watching places us into. It is in the world which God made and God loves that we are called to be watchers. The announcement of peace is given on the city wall, in public, in the wider world, the place where you and I go about our daily business, the world of work, of commuting, of libraries and of dining halls, of street people, of families and holidays. It is about being caught up in God's mission and about having our eyes opened to those realities. It is perhaps not the image that we might at first expect ordained ministry to be

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described as but I begin here as Ruskin said in order that we might begin to read the signs of God's presence in our world. In some ways, this is a call for all of us as disciples but the particular role of the ordained is to enable people to make those connections which enable people to be the people of peace in God's world. This is the great strength of the church, that ordinary disciples make those links in their places of living and working and those who are ordained are there both as part of that and as encouragers and announcers of that good news.

And at times, it is very hard. It is hard to announce good news to the people of Syria at the moment. It is hard to announce good news if you are holding the hand of a dying young woman in a hospital bed when you literally have nothing to say. It is hard to announce good news when a colleague is beaten down by the pressures of work and does not know where to turn. But these are the places that we are called to be present in and it is the great privilege of ordained ministry to be able to be present at precisely those moments both of joy and of deep lament.

But alongside watching, comes a second theme that I would like to explore and that is one of enabling. This is the heart of the reading from Ephesians, all about how the body of Christ on earth is to continue to do the work of God. There is some rich imagery within this of how a body is to function but in verse 12 we have a summary of what ministry is about in its focus on enabling others and equipping the saints for the work of ministry. As with watching, this is a picture of a minister whose focus is not on themselves but on enabling the life and ministry of another. Theologically, the root of this is found a few verses earlier in the picture of the Ascension of Christ. This was the point in Christ's life where he physically leaves the earth but then sends the Holy Spirit precisely to enable God's people to carry on that work. The image may be a poor one but I often liken this to a football manager who can prepare a team for a game, give all the instructions needed but in the end has to trust the team to play the game. Yes some instructions can be bellowed from the touchline but trust is at the heart of this and that is precisely what God has done in trusting the work of peacemaking, that word appears again here, to the people of God. If that is the model, then those as ordained people who are called to represent Christ should therefore be people whose life is marked by that same trust. Ministry then is about building up that body, watching out for gifts and skills, encouraging and enabling them to happen rather than the model which is so often passed down of being an omniscient solo operator. The picture in this reading is of reciprocity, of interdependence, reminiscent perhaps of the images of the vine in John's gospel.

One of the most moving events in my own ministry came when my wife and I were living in North Bedfordshire. She unexpectedly had to have an operation and during her recuperation, a villager brought up to us at the vicarage a home made meal. On one level this was unexceptional, on another level, she walked the length of the village to drop this off, had to walk up a long drive, was not very well known to us, was herself not well off and this was a really significant piece of generosity and ministry. It taught me a great deal about ministry as learning to receive as well as what it is to allow people to exercise their gifts as indeed she was doing. And this story can be repeated many times over. I have recently moved on from being Principal of the Eastern Region Ministry Course who train women and men for ministry in East Anglia and it never ceased to amaze me at what growth in confidence happened to many people as they realised that the gifts which God has given them could be used to build up the church and to engage in God's mission in the world. The value of an ecology of enabling, affirmation and encouragement is something that cannot be underestimated.

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Watching and enabling – two small words to begin to describe something of what it is to be called to minister. During that same student time here in Cambridge, alongside the watching lesson from my Director of studies, I also learnt an enabling lesson from a then deaconess who would go onto be ordained who had the courage to recognise that perhaps I might have the gifts which God could use within ordained ministry. Her gentle nudging of me alongside all the opportunities that University life has to offer to contribute to Christian communities began a journey for me that led me to a year's voluntary work in inner city Manchester and then onto ordination training. Her example to me of someone who had interest in enabling others to reach their potential has stayed with me and so I want to end by asking those of you here the same kind of question. We all have a calling from God to respond to. Many of us will do so as faithful disciples in our workplaces, families and communities and that is the highest of callings, what Christian faith is all about. And certainly the world needs Christians who can be attentive to and point others to the presence of God in our midst. But there has been a long tradition of places such as this producing those who will be called to ordained ministry to a watching and an enabling of others as they are caught up in the mission of God and the building up of the body of Christ. I wonder whether God is nudging you to have your eyes opened to all that is possible?