

**Sermon at Service of Ordination of Elizabeth Richardson
Wesley Church Canberra, 11 October 2009**

Gregor Henderson

Romans 12:1-13, John 12:20-26

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

In larger Congregational churches, especially central city churches, there is a tradition that across the top of the pulpit, seen only by the preacher, words from John 12 verse 21 are printed, in the old King James version - "Sir, we would see Jesus", translated for us today as "Sir, we wish to see Jesus".

It's probably apocryphal, but there's a story told at Collins St Independent Church in Melbourne, now St Michael's Uniting, that when a visiting preacher clambered up the stairs to the high pulpit and was confronted with "Sir, we would see Jesus" he immediately said "Oh, sorry, I'm not Jesus; I'm not even the apostle Andrew" and he went straight back down the stairs and sat with folded arms. Apparently it took them several minutes to convince him they still wanted to have him preach, and then he would only do so from the lectern - too much of a challenge to preach from that pulpit!

Ministers of the Word are ordained, more than anything else, for the purpose of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed. We will hear that very clearly in just a few minutes, when Ian delivers "The Charge" to Elizabeth. Note that helping people to see Jesus involves both word and deed, it's not just preaching and teaching, but it's in every aspect of ministry and through every aspect of a minister's life, that a minister helps people to see Jesus, to come to know Jesus, to love and follow Jesus - or not as the case may be. That is the task to which ministers of the Word are called.

It is an enormous responsibility and an enormous privilege to be called by God to ordained ministry, to have the blessing of the church in recognising God's call to us and in training and equipping us for ministry, and to be placed by the church in a congregation or agency or other ministry position where we can exercise our calling and serve God as a minister of God's Word.

It's an extraordinary privilege too the way church members and many people outside the church automatically accept ministers as a person to be trusted, to confide in, to listen to, to receive counsel from. The people of God give to ministers many marvellous moments - moments when you see God at work amongst us, when you see your own preaching, pastoral caring and leadership directly bearing fruit, moments when you clearly recognise God is alive and active among our people. The privilege and the trust the church gives to us is immense, the responsibility the church gives to us is daunting, and we ministers must respond with humility, prayerfulness, faithfulness and courage.

In the Uniting Church in Australia, we have produced many statements about the meaning of ordination and the role of ministers. Our Basis of Union, our church's foundational document, says this:

"Since the Church lives by the power of the Word, it is assured that God, who has never failed to provide witness to that word, will, through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, call and set apart members of the Church to be ministers of the Word. These will preach the Gospel, administer the sacraments and exercise

pastoral care so that all may be equipped for their particular ministries, thus maintaining the apostolic witness to Christ in the Church. Such members will be called Ministers and their setting apart will be known as Ordination.”

The summary phrase which has always appealed to me as a concise description of the role of ordained ministers is “guardians and promoters of the gospel”. As guardians of the gospel - called by God, educated to know the gospel of Jesus Christ fully and deeply, trained in the practice of witnessing to and living out this gospel - ministers are always to be asking the question of their own sermons, their own lives and the life of the church “where is the gospel of Jesus in this? is my preaching, my life, consistent with the gospel? is the life of this congregation, this church agency, this church, consistent with the gospel?” And if there’s any doubt about an affirmative answer to those questions, then the minister is duty-bound to address the shortcomings in his or her own preaching, in his or her own life or in the life of the congregation or church. That’s the role of guardian of the gospel.

But it’s more than that. Guardian or watchman or sentinel is essentially a defensive role, a looking-back sort of role. Ministers are called also to be leaders in promoting the gospel of Jesus, to serve in such a way that those inside the church and those outside the church can see in the minister the integrity of Christian faith, the reality of the gospel of love and self-giving service, one who is constant in showing God’s gifts of abundant and eternal life are there, offered in love to everyone.

Elizabeth Richardson is being ordained today because she has come to recognise God’s call to her and God’s gifting to her of the abilities she needs to be a minister of the Word. And, because the church has recognised her calling and her gifts, tested them, helped her to build on them through the education and training she has received, and has now, finally, determined she’s ready for ordination.

In Romans chapter 12 Paul writes that we have gifts which differ according to the grace given us by God. He lists 7 gifts as examples - prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leadership and compassion. On my count Elizabeth has at least 6 of those, maybe even the full 7 when you realise prophecy is the gift of perceiving God’s word for particular situations. And that’s to say nothing of Elizabeth’s deep spirituality, her intelligence, her thoughtfulness and her extraordinary gifts of understanding people, caring for people, and bringing God’s love to people. All of us here in the Canberra Central Parish know Elizabeth’s gifts well, and we are reluctant to accept that we are likely to lose her from the parish. The spontaneous joy expressed throughout the parish when it became known Elizabeth was to be ordained was a wonderful affirmation of her giftedness and of the rightness of her ordination.

So today we rejoice. One who is a gifted leader of the church, one who gives of herself every day in humble self-giving service to God, one who is a true guardian and promoter of the gospel of Jesus, is to be ordained. Paul goes on to give good advice to every Christian, particularly applicable to the ordained - “let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good, love one another with mutual affection, outdo one another in showing honour, do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord, rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer”.

I conclude with pleasure by reverting to old Congregational pulpits, and saying “Madam, we would see Jesus” and by affirming with joy, that in you Elizabeth, we do.

To the glory of God, Amen.