



# Season of Lay Ministries

## Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

### 28 January 2024

#### Living as God's people

##### Readings

Deuteronomy 18:15-20  
Psalm 111  
Revelation 12.1-5a  
Mark 1.21-28

May I speak in the name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Geographically speaking, the Gospel readings during this season of Epiphany have been all over the place, starting in Jerusalem and Bethlehem at Epiphany, then travelling via Jesus' baptism on the banks of the River Jordan between Jerusalem and the Sea of Galilee, to the wider Galilee area where Nathaniel was called and the wedding celebrated at Cana. In today's reading, Jesus and his disciples are now on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, in Capernaum. In these weeks, the Gospel readings have travelled about 120 miles, but having started in the place where he was born, thirty years later we (and Jesus) are now in the area which is viewed as his 'home'. In the account of his baptism, Jesus is described as coming "from Nazareth of Galilee"; before Nathaniel speaks with Jesus, he disparagingly asks "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"; and Cana is close enough to Nazareth for Mary not just to be able to attend a wedding there, but to be able to stay long enough for the wine to have run out.

These different passages, some from John's Gospel and some from Mark's, clearly show that at the start of his ministry, Jesus is very much operating on his home turf - maybe a little widely defined, but still broadly the area which he knows and where people know him. Which may help to explain some of the surprise expressed by Jesus' hearers when he speaks in the synagogue in Capernaum on the sabbath - this is someone from just down the road, the son of a carpenter, who's not supposed to be better at

expounding the Scriptures than the people who are trained at it!

And the area where someone grew up, the place where they are known, within their own community, can sometimes be the hardest place for someone to be called to serve God by serving, leading, and teaching others. Being well-known (possibly too well-known) by those around you as you step up into a new role isn't always easy. The traditional model for the majority of those called to ordained ministry (although not for everyone) is to go from their 'sending parish', via some years of training elsewhere, to serve in a different parish after ordination - they (hopefully) will come to feel settled in that place, but it won't usually be exactly where they themselves grew up, or grew to faith.

This doesn't tend to be the case, though, for those who are called by God to be lay ministers - whether that's as Readers, as youth or children's workers, as SPAs, or in other kinds of non-ordained ministry. We - and I speak as a Reader, a Licensed Lay Minister - are almost always called from within our own church community to serve that community, to continue on our journey of faith with the same companions we've been walking with up until now, but relating to them in a different way as we carry on along the road. Different opportunities may also present themselves as we obey God's call, which may take us away from our home communities for a season, but in essence, the starting point is also the destination - to be with a particular group of God's people as we do our best together to hear God's words to us.

And of course, the idea of people being called from within a community to share God's words with that community isn't new. In the passage from Deuteronomy, we see that as Moses comes to the end of his life and tries to prepare the people of Israel for what happens next, the people aren't yet ready to engage with God themselves, but still need someone to speak to God for them, and to speak to them on God's behalf. God therefore promises that they will

have another prophet to live among them, to speak God's words to them and help them live as God's people as they move into the Promised Land.

The role and calling of a prophet can often be misunderstood, with a lot of focus on predicting or foretelling the future. Archbishop Rowan Williams, in his book *Being Christian*, points out that as shown in the Hebrew Scriptures, prophets "act and speak to call the people of Israel back to their own essential truth and identity", and that they do this "for the sake of a community's integrity, its faithfulness to who it is really meant to be". This comment is part of Archbishop Rowan's consideration of what it means to be baptised, to be part of God's family as a Christian - so being a prophet is a role to which any, or all, of us may potentially be called!

The Diocese of Southwark doesn't (yet) affirm, commission or license prophets - at least, not under that name! But this Season of Lay Ministries is an opportunity to raise awareness of the different kinds of formal lay ministry which are encouraged and supported in the Diocese. Recognising that God may be calling you in some way to stand up, to speak out, to lead and to serve in your own community can be scary - but it can also be a way of God working not just in individuals, but in the whole of the community of which those individuals are part, as the challenge to the community to be what it is meant to be (as per Rowan Williams) is both made and accepted.

There's no expectation that we'll all be able to cast out demons, but by the grace of God and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we too can follow our calling to speak with authority of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

*Clare Dowding, Reader, All Saints, Blackheath*

## A prayer for the Season of Lay Ministries 2024

*Written by Marie Williams, Southwark Pastoral Auxiliary (SPA), Holy Saviour, Croydon*

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!' Isaiah 6:8 (NRSV)

Lord Jesus,  
We give you thanks that  
you consider us worthy to serve you  
and have called us into ministries of many different kinds.

We pray for all those who are exploring what God's call means in their lives.  
Help them to know God's peace and guiding as they listen for God's voice.

And we pray for those already in ministry that as they carry out your work you will help them to demonstrate your love,  
your compassion and your truth  
so that others may see your beauty and embrace you as Lord and Saviour  
We ask this in the name of your Son Jesus Christ.

Amen.

## Suggested hymns

God has spoken by his prophets  
Lord of all Love's creation  
O Thou who camest from above  
We have a Gospel to proclaim  
Will you come and follow me  
And can it be  
Bless the Lord o my soul (10000 Reasons)  
Give thanks with a grateful heart  
The Servant King  
There is a Redeemer  
God has spoken to his people Alleluia  
Sing with all my Soul