

## READERS' 150<sup>th</sup>

Matins, 31<sup>st</sup> July 2016

**Texts:** Jeremiah 1, 4 – 10; Colossians 3, 1 – 11 & Luke 12, 13- 21.

### Introduction

In the first lesson we heard that Jeremiah wanted a quiet life, - anywhere away from the *lime light*; but God wanted him to deliver unwelcome messages to Israel. Jeremiah replied: *Lord God! Behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child.* However, he did as he was bid.

On Ascension Day 1866, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York met at Lambeth Palace, when they revived the role of Reader in the English Church. There had been *lectors* in the early church, when in the C2<sup>nd</sup>, selection criteria: *For a Reader one should be appointed after he has been carefully proved; no babbler, nor drunkard, nor jester; of good morals, submissive, of benevolent intentions.* - Please tell me if I *babble* too much this morning!

The Victorian Archbishops realised that many Oxbridge- graduates were ordained lacking pastoral experience and specific training for ministry; - they saw the need for laity to help to minister in expanding industrial congregations. The new Readers had to be male and of good standing in their churches, but they were not trained for their role. Women were not licenced as Readers until 1969 (when men were first permitted to preach at the Eucharist). However, that there are now about 10,000 Readers (women and men in equal numbers) - shows that they are important to the life of the World-wide Anglican Church.

### Southwark

The centre spread of *The Bridge* features 250 Readers in Southwark Diocese. Not every church has a reader and sadly some do not employ them! They work with clergy, - serving in a variety of liturgical and pastoral roles; including preaching, teaching, prison missions, serving as deacons and conducting funerals. They do great work, but many are retired, or are approaching retirement.

### Vocation

For me, worship began 70 years ago in the choir of St Mark's Wimbledon; in Hong Kong I led a Sunday school for 60 children and have since been involved in various churches around the world, including six years as general factotum in St George's, Berlin. Back in England, I became Secretary to Bishop Roy Williamson's Mission and Unity Committee. However, it took Heinz to *kick start* me into offering myself for Readership; leading to interviews and a day of selection tests in 2001. For three years a diverse group of candidates from across the Diocese studied together on Thursday evenings, to become good friends, but sadly some could not stand the pace and fell by the wayside!

The Southwark Readers' Course has since been extended to four years; but training and study does not stop. Concurrently with my theological studies, I became a welfare worker with SSAFA and began reading for a science degree with the OU. In some ways the roles of reader and case-worker are complimentary, - meeting people where they are at difficult times on their life journeys, to share compassion and practical support.

The lead time to produce a Reader is about five years, so time is short. It is difficult to discern your own vocation, however, perhaps some will examine their consciences; - to hear a call, as Jeremiah did; even to offer yourself. The mystic Trappist monk, Thomas Merton once asked, - *What are we living for?* and, - *What keeps us from living it?* Let us pray that someone here will say, - *Lord here am I, send me!* Amen

Words ~ 1,100

1. Colossians 3, 3.
2. Hans Christian Andersen.

### Preaching

Jesus was a consummate story- teller; his messages of peace and justice are relevant today. His hard-hitting eloquence arose from His deep insights, and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, - to tell old truths in new ways. The worldly wealth of the prosperous landowner in today's Gospel story contrasts with his spiritual poverty; - reflecting some in modern business, whose greed exceeds their duty of care to their workers and the wider community. And St Paul did not flinch from grasping the difficult issues, - as he worked out the nature of faith on the hoof, to discover that, - *our life is hid with Christ in God!*

Each sermon is a fresh challenge, requiring wide reading and meditation to understand, - *What does God Want Me to Say?* - in the light of our times, - to make the Gospel relevant to people's needs in prevailing situations. For faith should help us to *live our lives courageously*, to discern how to cope with the challenges we face. And sharing faith is demanding, especially for one with many questions, but few answers.

### Sermons

I have kept count of my sermons, today is Number 250, - mostly delivered here at St Pauls, but also elsewhere; once in a Roman Catholic Cathedral, the National Arboretum, in Edinburgh Castle, often in my Regimental Chapel and memorably at Hyannis Port on Cape Cod, where the Kennedy Clan Chaplain presided to make it legal! Bertrand Olivier invited me to speak at All Hallows on Tower Hill, where in 1956 I said evening prayer with Tubby Clayton, on my way home from a dreary desk in St Katherine's Dock. Most recently I led a service for 150 veterans in the Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool.

### Funerals

After more training, I was licenced to conduct funerals; - a challenging and fulfilling role. In meeting grieving relatives, many of whom are unchurched, one has opportunity to share one's hope in Christ. Many questions arise, as one learns about the deceased, in order to celebrate them, and to try to resolve family antipathies and legacies of regret; in an all too brief service in the Crem'.

### Many Gifts

I believe that the two most important features of this Church; - are the quality of our worship (enhanced by our music, for - *where words fail, music speaks*<sup>2</sup>) and the quality of your involvement. You, - yes all of you in this congregation reflect the comment about the early Christians; - *See how they love one another!* Dear friends, we come together to worship, with all our hopes and failings, our piety and doubts; but you are not just observers, - not passive *bottoms on pews*, for you *resonate*, you are participators, - sharing in so many ways, - enhancing the life of this Church and the Community. I am most grateful for your support and encouragement, feedback and especially for your challenges.

### Conclusion

We were much blessed by the ministries of John and Anne Townsend when they worshipped here; and they continue to be active in their retirement at Bromley College. Meanwhile Heinz kindly endorses my *PTO*, - my annual permission to officiate. However, *my sell-by date is soon!* There is a continuing need for lay involvement in ministry, worship and management. If this Church is to flourish, it will face several challenges, not least in finding those to minister.