

# keynote address

KEYNOTE ADDRESS GIVEN TO THE WATCH AGM 1 November 2008  
by Canon Joy Tetley

## FOR GOD'S SAKE

This is a deliberately ambiguous title. Much depends on how you say it. It is, of course, a very common expletive. As such, it is a vehicle for all kinds of feelings, not least frustration, anger and hurt. In the context of 'women and the church', and in particular the matter of women as bishops, it can, perhaps, be powerfully expressive of a wide range of views and reactions. Many of us will have heard (or given voice to) comments such as the following:

"For God's sake, get on with it. Just do it."

"Don't you realise what you're doing, for God's sake? You're destroying the Church."

"Oh, for God's sake, I've had enough of all this. Let the church go hang."

That last one should give us particular cause for concern. At a time when devotees of atheism are ever more zealously proclaiming their message, the Church of England as by law established is perceived by many as turning in on itself, indeed as turning on itself, in self-destructive fervour. Not exactly an attractive option. These are critical times, for the wider community as well as for the Church. So how should we be addressing them, for God's sake?

That question, in *fact*, points us very much in the direction of the heart of the matter. Many expletives which purloin the name of God or Jesus contain within them, all unrecognized, significant Gospel truth. Our present example is no exception. The Church exists, quite literally, for God's sake – and the sake of God's world. All that we are and do, and the way we do it, should therefore be, first and foremost, for God's sake. That includes, of course, the struggle of our current debate. It *matters*, for God's sake. Both the process and the outcome really matter. And they do so for profoundly *theological* reasons (*godly* reasons). What the Church of England is engaged with at the moment in relation to membership of the episcopate is not, in truth, a distraction. It provides – or should do, if we would but grasp it in this way – a crucial opportunity to explore and express the reality of God. That should be to the benefit of the world in which we live, not merely a means of sorting out the Church's problems. And, God knows, the world needs such blessing.

All God's people, whatever their viewpoint, enjoy the ineffable privilege of being called to participate in God's

very life. And that involves responding to the divine imperative to love after the manner of Christ, to work for the proper flourishing of humankind and all creation. A tall order, but an inescapable one if we bear the name of Christ. Whether women should be bishops, and, so to speak, on what terms, belongs very much in this context.

What is at issue here, if mere mortals may frame it thus, is no less than who God is, how God operates, and what God's purposes might be. This is our over-arching and urgent agenda. Perhaps, at this stage especially, we need to be more upfront about that. In the brief time available this afternoon, I'd like to pursue this theological agenda just a little, and primarily from my perspective as a biblical explorer. In particular, I want to highlight some themes, which I believe are highly pertinent, from a New Testament writing which has received strangely little attention in this whole controversy about women and the church.

First, some **core observations**. However well-crafted and thought-out our doctrinal words and formulae might be, they cannot pin down the enormity of the mystery who is God. As St Augustine succinctly put it, "If you have comprehended, *what* you have comprehended is not God." There has always been a strong apophatic dimension in the life, experience and teaching of the Church, stressing that God is far greater than all our attempts at definition and explanation. Even the credal statements are bursting with possibilities beyond our rational ken. We might acknowledge, far more often than we do perhaps, that God should reduce us to silence.

Yet *God* has *spoken*. And God has invited us into passionate relationship – a relationship characterised by the *exchange* of love and the exploration of love. In living, loving relationships, there is always more to be discovered – if only we are open to listen, and adventurous enough to risk our security. **Faith** seeks understanding – not certainty.

The Scriptures bear powerful witness to this truth. They disclose a tantalising God; a God who will not be tamed or confined; a God who breaks out of boundaries, even sacred boundaries; a God who constantly surprises and challenges, yet is utterly trustworthy and faithful; a God whose burning holiness takes God into the middle of the messiness of the world; a God whose passionate love puts God on the receiving end of savage abuse; a God bursting with creativity, vitality and joy, who nonetheless

weeps with those who weep; a God who is greater than all that is, yet with a personal touch that is awesome in its intensity. God, in essence, is **love**. All else flows from this. Love is God's motivation, God's *modus operandi*, God's mission. What might this mean?

In the Scriptures, we encounter the God who is, at heart, the God of Cross and Resurrection; the God who comes to us where we are and goes to hell and back with us and for us; the God who will go to any lengths to open up the fulfilment of love's potential – including stretching the 'rules' to breaking point.

We see this very clearly in the **Letter to the Hebrews**. This radical New Testament document has not featured largely in the debate about women and the church. It has been, at best, marginal to the discussion. Indeed, it has tended to be somewhat marginal to New Testament studies as a whole let alone to the attention of theologians more generally. That is perhaps fitting for a "word of exhortation" (as it calls itself) which sees God setting aside mainstream (God-given) tradition and following through a marginal thread – not because of divine obstreperousness but in passionate pursuit of God's mission of love. Perhaps we should begin to 'listen up'!

Hebrews is no abstract theological treatise. Like most of the rest of the New Testament, it is, as it were, 'circumstantial theology' – provoked into articulation by the pressure of actualities, practicalities, *circumstances*; theology grappled with, of necessity, on the way ('synodically' you might almost literally say!). It was as our earliest Christian forebears followed 'on the way' that they were impelled by *what happened* to engage on every level of being with the tantalising calling of a tantalising God. Along the twists and the turns of the way, through confusion and questioning, misunderstanding and lostness, tears and heartbreak, to a new way of seeing, a vision beyond their imagining at the outset, and an urgent mission to a world both sceptical and credulous. This is not an easy way to do theology. But it does *lead* somewhere – and somewhere very significant.

In the case of Hebrews, the community addressed (whoever and wherever they were) were clearly in a very hard place on their faith journey – to the deep concern of the person writing to them. Whoever *that* was desperately wanted to give them an injection of courage and fresh vision. They were disheartened to the point of giving up, over-whelmed by the effects of hostility and opposition. It seems that this expression of the body of Christ was in serious danger of falling apart, threatened, not least, by what Hebrews describes as the "root of bitterness" (Heb.12:15) taking hold in the soil of fear. Their experience is not, perhaps, unique.

The one trying to get through to them in this parlous situation urges them to endurance. The exhortation to 'hang on in there' permeates what is, in effect, a sermon for a time of crisis. But the preacher realises that just telling them to persevere is not enough. They need to be

reminded of why they should bother to try. They need to be re-energised and re-focused in their relationship with God. They need to "see Jesus" afresh.

So the preacher opens for them a **new vision of Jesus** which is no less than stunning. It is both profoundly encouraging and deeply challenging. Like God. Indeed, Hebrews intends there to be no doubt that when God's people look to *Jesus*, they see into the heart of God. The magnificent opening sentence (covering the first four verses of our English translation) says it all.

*"Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us in a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also he created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs"* (Heb. 1:1-4).

Jesus is God's "character" (1:3) and Jesus is "the same yesterday, today and for ever" (13:8). And Jesus is "*our great High Priest*", incarnating "once for all" a priestly ministry which is both divine and definitive. **Here is the absolutely effective self-expression of God's priestly yearning for intimate communion with all.** Only Hebrews among the New Testament writers presents us with such an explicit and extended portrayal of the 'godly priesthood' of Jesus.

This is radical territory. Whoever those addressed by Hebrews were, it seems clear that they had close associations with Jewish tradition. They would be familiar, therefore, with the priestly provision believed to have been made by God to enable an appropriate measure of safe communion. In that context, seeing Jesus as great high priest presented a major theological – and, indeed, ecclesiological – obstacle. The preacher not only recognizes this but regards it as integral to his perception of the way God works. The matter is succinctly expressed at the heart of the sermon's argument:

*"Now if perfection had been attainable through the levitical priesthood – for the people received the law under this priesthood – what further need would there have been to speak of another priest arising according to the order of Melchizedek, rather than one according to the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.*

*"Now the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe, Moses said nothing about priests"* (Heb. 7:11-14).

**The incarnate self-expression of God was breaking the rules of the sacred assembly, the rules of a sacred order**

**instituted by God.** Jesus was not qualified to be a priest. His priesthood flies in the face of the received tradition of generations. Here is God exercising the divine prerogative to do a new thing: to be original, innovative, creative – bursting boundaries in order for divine love to have its full impact – reshaping and redefining a tradition which can only have meaning insofar as it ministers God’s saving grace. It is not, of course, that God has, so to speak, got it wrong in its earlier version. It is, rather, that God has opened up a new avenue (a ‘new and living way’) to enable the fundamental purpose behind the tradition to be fully realised.

That purpose, for Hebrews, is best understood through the fulfilment of a bedrock divine promise – that of a new covenant. Hebrews quotes it at length (the only NT writer to do so):

*“This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord.*

*I will put my laws in their minds,  
and write them on their hearts,  
and I will be their God,  
and they shall be my people.  
And they shall not teach one another  
or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord’,  
for they shall all know me,  
from the least of them to the greatest.  
For I will be merciful toward their iniquities,  
and I will remember their sins no more.”*

In speaking of ‘a new covenant’, says Hebrews, God “has made the first one obsolete” (Heb. 8:10-13).

Hallowed tradition, it seems, *can* be set aside, in the interests of releasing more completely the truth which prompted its formulation in the first place. “They shall all know me”, says the Lord, “from the least of them to the greatest...I will remember their sins no more.” Here is the ‘knowing’, not so much of information *about* God as of intimate relationship *with* God – a relationship which God intends should be open to **all**, without distinction. At the very throne of grace, everyone belongs and everyone is of equal standing. Such is the imperative of God’s mission.

It is the sacrificial, priestly love of God in Jesus which makes this possible. Through an unorthodox priest, consigned and killed “outside the camp” (Heb. 13.11-13), outside the boundaries of the holy, come world-transforming consequences. What is at first seen as shameful carries the costly creativity of God.

Through an unorthodox priest...Yes – but it is also the insight of Hebrews that the irregular priesthood of Jesus was not without its traditional pointers. God might be doing a new thing, but, off centre stage, there had been signals. Jesus is a high priest **“after the order of Melchizedek”**. This king/priest Melchizedek is a mysterious and marginal figure, mentioned only twice in the canonical Hebrew Scriptures (Gen. 14:18-20 and Ps. 110:4). He was, indeed, an outsider, not even a member of God’s chosen people. **Yet it is this figure from the edges of tradition who, for Hebrews, provides the paradigm for God’s decisive intervention in Jesus.** Melchizedek contributed dimensions which the mainstream Aaronic priests could not (see especially Hebrews 7). His time had come.

I’m tempted to end by saying. ‘Let the reader understand’. Certainly I would argue that Hebrews’ particular theological insights need to be fed into *any* discussions about the nature of God and God’s working, very much including that relating to women as bishops in the Church of England. Hebrews, after all, is undeniably part of the sacred tradition, integral to the canonical Scriptures. Its perspectives matter, therefore, and have crucial things to speak into the Church’s debating (and politicking). Our present arguing should most definitely be in the context of who God is, how God operates – and why. As I’ve suggested, Hebrews can take something of a searchlight to that. If God behaved as Hebrews perceived in the supremely indicative act of the incarnation, that must surely tell us something rather important about the essential *modus operandi* of God.

Tradition, however holy, is not God. It can be changed, and for very good reasons. “Where there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well”, Hebrews reminds us (Heb. 7:13). But that ‘change’ by no means dispenses with the fundamental meaning and intention of the ministry that has gone before. It brings them to fruition. Such change *is*, however, messy, painful and disturbing, demanding a radical shift in perspective and the courage to continue on a risky and exploratory path, leading outside the hitherto defined boundaries of the camp. This is new territory, and the only map is in the shape of a cross. But look what emerged from *that* confusion, darkness and mess – the explosion of Easter and Pentecost. Look to Jesus – and why he endured all that shame and pain. No less than for God’s sake, and the sake of God’s world.

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