

Sermon by Dr Muriel Porter
St John's Camberwell
Second Sunday in Pentecost 2008 (25 May 2008)

Matthew 6: 22-34



Today's Gospel reading is both comforting and challenging. Jesus tells us today to stop worrying - stop worrying because God knows what our needs are and God will provide. But do we dare believe Jesus? Do we *really* trust that, as the medieval mystic Mother Julian of Norwich put it, all will be well and all will be well and all manner of thing will be well?

This Gospel reading is not a self-improvement guide, advising us to relax and let go because worrying won't do us any good. Besides, surely we have enough worries for today without worrying about tomorrow. Yes, all of that is true, but we would be very much mistaken if we thought of Jesus as primarily a life coach. At the heart of this Gospel, Jesus challenges us to trust in God and direct our priorities towards God, God's kingdom, and God's righteousness. *Then*, says Jesus, all these things – all that we need – will be given to us as well.

The Vicar has invited me to preach today in the light of the consecration of Kay Goldsworthy as Australia's first woman bishop, a wonderful event which took place on Thursday in Perth. He asked me to reflect with you on what that momentous event means, and on the long journey that has brought us to this point. I was delighted to accept his invitation, as this parish has been in the forefront of support for women in ordained ministry, and specially in the episcopate.



Some of you will remember the memorable Sunday in 1992 when Bishop Penny Jamieson of Dunedin, New Zealand – now retired – visited this parish. Resplendent in the beautiful lilac cope and mitre given to her by the women of New Zealand when she was consecrated just two years earlier – only the second woman bishop in the world! – she was formally welcomed to St John's as a "Mother-in-God". I still have a framed photograph taken that day in pride of place in my study. It has been a constant source of inspiration in the long years of struggle since then.

But what do women bishops and the political struggle that was involved, have to do with today's Gospel? Actually, quite a lot, so I am couching my reflections on Kay's consecration in the light of the Gospel teaching to trust in God as we strive to bring in God's kingdom, and God's righteousness, here and now.

The campaign for women's ordination, sadly, has often been caricatured in derogatory fashion as merely another "women's lib" issue. Just recently, people like me have been accused of caring only about women's rights and not a jot about the Gospel. The women bishops' cause is all about women trying to ascend the power ladder and share in the "honey pot" of privilege, it is claimed: ours was a scandalous theology of ministry.

What *is* a "scandalous theology of ministry", however, is a theology that bars people from ministry because of their gender, or colour or race. Substitute the word "black" for "woman", and you see what I mean. We would all be rightly scandalised if any bishop of our Church declared that a black man could not be a priest or bishop, yet some people are quite comfortable about barring women simply because they are women. Struggling for women's rights, in any context – in society or in the Church - is in fact a deeply theological issue, because the Bible teaches us that God created humankind – all humankind, both male and female - in God's own image.

From the beginning, the struggle for women to be ordained has been about righting the Church's failure to understand that God created women as fully human. The struggle was inspired by the example of Jesus himself. Again and again in the Gospels we see Jesus honouring women in ways that would have been regarded as scandalous by the religious leaders of his day. He refused to abide by the rules that regarded women as inferior, their femininity as a threat, and their bodies as a source of pollution. He healed with his touch the woman with the chronic menstrual haemorrhage – an affliction that made her an untouchable in her society. He defended and protected the woman caught in adultery; he treated with respect the much-married Samaritan woman at the well; and he healed a little girl after her foreigner mother outrageously refused to take his initial "no" for an answer. He included women among his band of disciples, and at his resurrection, appeared first to women. To Mary Magdalene, he said, go and tell the other disciples I am risen from the dead. Mary thus became the "Apostle to the Apostles", commissioned by the Lord himself to be the first – *the first* – to proclaim his resurrection.

For the best part of 2000 years, the Church conveniently overlooked the Lord's own compelling example and tried to keep women in their place. Over the past 150 years, changes have slowly, hesitantly, unfolded as devout Christian women and men reminded the Church, and wider society, of women's God-given equality. It was Christian women and men who first argued for women's right to vote, for women to have rights in marriage, rights over their children, and over their property, for women to have the right to academic training, to jobs and careers, to become professional people and to become leaders in society. The Church, sadly, has taken much longer to respond to the call of God to give women the place and honour God created them to enjoy.

For more than 30 years, I am glad to say, this Diocese of Melbourne has responded to that call, and has championed women in public ministry. Consistently it has striven to see women admitted to Holy Orders - to the orders of deacon, priest and bishop. Consistently it has been thwarted by conservatives, principally in the Diocese of Sydney, intent on keeping women in submission.

In the face of repeated failures, of ongoing bitterness, public attack, and private lampooning, it has been very tempting over those years to give up. Quite a number did give up. Many of the women I knew who were at the forefront of the struggle in the late 1970s and early 1980s were so damaged that they could no longer endure it. For those of us who have lasted the distance, it has not been easy. We have paid a high price.

Now that the struggle is over, I have realised just how pessimistic I had become. Some of you will know that the cause of women bishops was virtually doomed in the national Church, because of the intransigence of a powerful minority. With no other options left, I organised a reference to the Church's highest court, the Appellate Tribunal, seeking clarification as to whether the Church constitution might in fact already allow women to be bishops, now that they could be priests. The Tribunal found in our favour: yes, where women can be priests in the Anglican Church of Australia, as is the case in all but a handful of dioceses, then they could also be bishops.

When I was told the wonderful news – the news that led directly to Kay's consecration last week - I could scarcely believe it. And as I digested it, I realised that at heart, I had fully expected we would lose. Not because we did not have an excellent case, but because, deep down, I did not really trust that God would bring this about.

Today's Gospel stands as a powerful corrective: *Strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*, says our Lord. Yes, even women bishops in God's good time, if that is truly of God. O you of little faith! I now hear Jesus reprimanding me! Again and again, Jesus had to reprimand his disciples for their lack of faith, even though he frequently made it clear to them that God could be trusted. As he is recorded as saying elsewhere in the Gospel, "Fear not, little flock. It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom".

Kay's consecration last Thursday was like another Easter Eve. A new fire has been lit, and the candles lit from it are the Light of Christ dispelling the shadows that have lingered over women for far too long. All women are, by her elevation, proclaimed as Daughters of God, made in God's image. But it will not make the Church perfect. It is, and will remain until the second coming, a deeply flawed institution, mainly because all of us – bishops, clergy, and lay people – do not really trust God. Again and again, we fall into the trap of thinking that it is all down to us – our efforts, of whatever kind, are what matters in building up the Church and in protecting the Church from our fears and failings. Our efforts are important, yes, but only if we are striving *first* for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, in all that we do.

This morning baby Alexander will become a member of God's Church in baptism. He will be called on to "live as a disciple of Christ", to "fight the good fight", to "finish the race", to "keep the faith". This charge is a reminder to the rest of us that we who are also marked in baptism as Christ's own forever; that we have as our primary duty to live as Christ's disciples, *keeping the faith*; trusting in God, seeking first and foremost what God wants, and trusting that God will deliver it; trusting that it will be the Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom – *God's* kingdom where love, and truth and justice and peace prevails, whether in the secular world, in the Church, or in our own day-to-day lives. God knows our needs, and God will surely supply them.

So do not worry. Trust in God, and all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well. Amen