

Sermon for the First Mass of the Revd. Vanessa Kerswill

Trinity V, 2019: Eph.2:11-21; Luke 22:24-27

A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be the greatest.

And Jesus told them: don't be stupid. This kind of squabbling is what the pagans do: who's bigger, who's better, who's more important. It is not to be so among you.

But the years went by, and what Jesus said got lost. And they went back to their bickering, and this time they went further.

They decided that actually, *some* of their number were greater than others.

They were specially close to God. They knew most about God. They were very holy. They could talk well. They were *leaders*.

And so we called them Reverend, or Father, or maybe even Mother. We gave them authority through a special ritual. We dressed them up in special clothes. And above all, we made them, and them alone, the ones who could preside at the Eucharist. Other people can do other things, of course. Ordinary church members could look after the church finances and building, run the youth work, or lead house groups – they could even, eventually, preach. But preside? Say the magic words - this is my body, this is my blood - and have them *work*, make a real Eucharist? No, that's for the special ones. That's for the priests.

A dispute arose among them as to who was the greatest, and eventually the Church said: well, priests, obviously.

And somewhere, Jesus wept.

So what is Jesus thinking today?

Is he thinking, listen: I'm thrilled about Vanessa and everything she does. I love that as a church you're willing her on and supporting her, and that you're going to have a big celebration with her this. But really, St. Lawrence, this isn't what I had in mind. I didn't mean for there to be special ones in my church. I didn't mean that you couldn't have communion without a priest. You do realise, don't you, that Vanessa isn't *that* special? That Peter, Guy, Brian, Angela, Bishop Alan, even Justin Welby or the Pope, none of them are *that* special? You do understand that any Christian can stand up there and do what Vanessa's doing? I spent most of my time criticising religious leaders who thought they were special. I didn't mean to set up another lot of them.

So have we got it all wrong then? Or *is* there something right and good in our ancient rule that only priests can do what Vanessa does today?

Let me start answering that with a memory from my own curacy. There was an old print that hung in the sacristy. Dating from the first world war, it was entitled 'the meeting place'. It showed a priest celebrating the eucharist, and in the background you could make out the faces of his congregation. But the memorable thing is that above and all around the priest hovered other ghostly figures, their heads bowed in prayer – figures in uniform, soldiers, sailors, and airmen killed in the war. Killed, but not lost, the picture said: killed, and yet still joined with us in the company of Christ. That picture said that the eucharist is never just celebrated by those who happen to be in the building at the time. It is never just our private, local act. The Body of Christ, which we say is made real here, is a gloriously vast thing: a mystery in which the lives of all believers, everywhere, everytime, living and dead, are fused into what Paul calls the fullness of Christ. That's why every Sunday in our eucharistic prayer we call the names of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Alban and Lawrence, and when we do so we're not only remembering them. We're saying they *they're here*: they're praying with us and for us, and we are being made one with them in Christ.

Now these can be strange and difficult thoughts, and so God gives us clues to help remember and understand them. And one of those clues is, now, Vanessa. When Bishop Alan ordained Vanessa, she became one way in which the Church makes real its unity across space and time. How do you know you're in Mary, Alban and Lawrence's Church? In part, because there's an identifiable handing on – a tradition – a sequence of persons: Vanessa, Bishop Alan, the Bishop who ordained him, the Bishop who ordained him, and so on and so on, right back to the earliest times. It's not the only way the church hangs together, of course, and it is easily mocked: but one shouldn't mock it, because it makes the really serious point that first and foremost, Christianity isn't rules or ideas or teachings or books: it is people, spread out but one across space and time.

And through ordination, Vanessa has become one of the ways you can recognise that people. One of the ways in which you know that this assembly, this gathering, is not just our little club but the great, universal church, spread out across space and time and yet focussed right here, right now. The Church that Jesus started, and built on his apostles. If you take the ordained priest out of it, what does that do? Many Christians would say you no longer have a Eucharist or Church at all. I wouldn't go that far, but you've definitely made it more difficult to recognise. You've made it look a bit more like a local club, a bit less like universal communion. That's why – or one reason why – our Church says eucharistic presidency belongs with the ordained.

Now, for Vanessa herself, this is both good news and bad news. The good news is that this has very little to do with her. She does not stand at that altar because she is especially good, clever, wise, prayerful, or loving. We have come to know that she is indeed all those things. But – whisper it softly - she isn't all the time. She is a flawed, sinful human being who cannot presume to come before the Lord's table trusting in her own righteousness. She stands there not because she is good, but because she is ordained. It is ordination, not virtue, that makes her a visible bond of the church's unity across time and space. She could be *vile*, utterly vile, and still what she symbolises would be real. And God would still have promised, unbreakably promised, to work through her in his sacraments. That is the good news, for her and for you.

So what's the bad news – or rather, the frightening news?. It is this: God can work without her, but he'd much rather work with her. He'd much rather that her priesthood went beyond doing the sacraments right: he'd much rather that her whole life became priestly. He'd much rather that her faith, hope, and love; her life and doctrine; her wisdom and prayer, everything about her, became ways in which each of you know this community is caught up in Christ. Become ways through which each one of us, and our life together, becomes knitted ever more deeply into Christ. As a great American theologian called Bruce Springsteen once sang: May your hope give us hope, may your faith give us faith, may your love give us love. That's Vanessa's job now, to draw each of us, by word, by teaching, by example, by care, by everything she is into the reality she symbolises, into the great unity of Christ. That's why prayer and preaching and pastoring and presiding go naturally together. That's the awesome responsibility laid on Vanessa in ordination. No wonder in the early church, famous saints tried everything they could to avoid getting ordained, and had to be virtually forced into it. The call is too much. As St. Paul once said, who is sufficient for these things?

Well, bluntly, no-one. The purposes of God are so rich, and our humanity so poor, that no-one is sufficient. But we have a gracious God, who somehow allows us to carry treasure in clay jars. Flesh and blood cannot do it, Vanessa alone cannot do it; but grace can and grace will. Grace can take even Vanessa's life, and through all her fragility and insufficiency, begin to grow glory. But it will only happen through prayer, much prayer – her own, first and foremost; but also *yours*. Pray for her, deeply, regularly, lovingly. Be a minister of grace to her, as she is to you. That mutual sharing of grace is what being the body of Christ means.

We're meeting around an altar like Alban and Lawrence did. We meet around the altar *with* Alban and Lawrence and the whole company of Heaven, and one of the reasons we know that is because Vanessa stands here with us. We meet at the altar to meet Christ, to receive his body and to become his body, to join the one glorious resurrection life shared by apostles, saints and martyrs in every age. We come close to Christ, and come close to each other, and as we do so each of us – you, me, Alban, Lawrence, Mary – each of us prays this morning especially for Vanessa. That she may grow into the call she has been given, that she may be truly priestly, that she will be one of the ways God leads us into glory. And then, helped by her, the whole Body will sing: glory to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.