

***A sermon preached by the  
Archbishop of Dublin Most  
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the Church of Ireland  
Theological Institute at the  
Commissioning of Students***



Haggai 2.4b: ... *take heart, all you people, says the Lord. Begin the work, for I am with you, says the Lord of Hosts, and my spirit remains among you. Do not be afraid.*

The prophecy of Haggai may seem not to be the most obvious place to start a Service which marks and celebrates the Commissioning of Student Ordinands for work in the Dioceses of Dublin and Glendalough, during their period of study, training and formation



in the Church of Ireland Theological Institute, a process leading in many cases towards ordination. The moment captured in this Reading, however, is one of realism. It is one of the

recognition, the facing, the confronting of decline and the subsequent recognition, facing and confronting of the imminent return of the Lord of Hosts: *In a little while from now I shall shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I shall shake all the nations, and the treasure of all nations will come here; and I shall fill this house with splendour, says the Lord of Hosts.* (Haggai 2:6,7) Haggai, of course, is talking about the new building of The Temple, after Exile and Return, that backdrop and foreground of Jewish identity for so much of the era of what we call The Old Testament.

And surely this is entirely pertinent to this evening and the work of God that we are doing here. We stand, as ever, between the precipice of decline and the new build of hope in the life of the church. Otherwise, God would not call people to listen to him and to listen to the cry of the poor and the voice of the marginalised. Those who are commissioned for the work of God tonight are invited by God to go with God's person and God's love far beyond the comfort zone of this Institute and the gossipy vestries of

parish churches; you are to go to what St Patrick, with distinct Biblical resonance, calls the ends of the earth.

At the heart of this evening's commissioning lie: God, the individual and the community.

*God* is the sender and the sent. There is no mission which is not the mission of God and there is no ministry which is not the ministry of God. It is in this framework that we appreciate the Holy Trinity and the pattern of Trinitarian life which has to be the lifeblood and the backbone of equipping of the saints for ministry and the shape of any credible Christian community life. Mission and ministry in this way of understanding are the cords of affection which continue to draw people to God and to hold in creative tension, across deep division, those who are drawn like this. There is, therefore, very little scope for the one-item agenda in the work of ministry; in fact, I would have to go so far as to say that when you let yourself become fuelled by a single item you become unepiscopal, unpriestly and undiaconal. The triumph of the part over the totality is not ultimately what is called for by God, or indeed what is heard by those who listen intently to God. There are times when intense concentration is required, but there are also times when total relaxation is asked for. The modulation of self-care is vitally important. Part of the commissioning tonight is the fresh

incorporation of each one of you into the body of Christ as people who, by spiritual discernment, read the signs of concentration and relaxation. This too is part and parcel of a community living spiritually.

*The individual* receives and carries responsibility and opportunity. This double gifting flows directly from our discipleship. It is something which we bring with us into ordination. As I am sure you are all far too aware, the great danger in ordained ministry is that we forget our non-ordained ministry and



therefore fail to continue to interpret and to engage the non-ordained ministry of others who, like us, are the church of God in our time and across time, as the Collect for All Saints' Day reminds us: *O almighty God, who has knit together thine elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of thy Son Christ our Lord ...* Those of you who are being commissioned this evening are opening yourselves to further responsibility and opportunity with God, for God and for God's people. The final words of St Paul to the elders of Miletus offer us the testimony of someone who

combined responsibility and opportunity and was always conscious that he carried within him for others the person of Christ in his ministry and mission. Among these words are the following and they hold as good today as they did then: And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which has power to build you up and give you your heritage among all those whom God has made his own. (Acts 20.32)

The thing that all of us needs to remember is that Paul made his own living throughout the time he exercised a ministry and a mission. There are increasingly clear signs that within the next five to ten years, this will be the pattern of ministry and of mission in the Church of Ireland. A lot of time and effort on your part and indeed on mine has gone into ensuring equivalence of training and formation across the ordained ministry of deacon and priest. I can tell you that this was introduced in the teeth of significant opposition. I remain convinced that for the dignity of ordained individuals this equivalence has been essential. However, as a church at large, we seem structurally incapable of recognising that the system as we know it is straining and buckling financially in such a way that stipendiary ministry as we know it is unsustainable. The expenditure required for the very maintenance of ministry at every level of church life is running out of road in what perhaps is the most serious way since Disestablishment. We may yet be reading with different eyes and ears the other words of St Paul in this chapter: *I have not wanted anyone's money or clothes for myself; you all know that*

*these hands of mine earned enough for the needs of myself and my companions.* (Acts 20.33,34). We are certainly heading in this direction.

*The community* is the place and the space where the individual not only lives but serves. Too much of our understanding of community, particularly in places of theological formation and training, is comfortably settled and potentially static. The community of which Jesus was a part seems fluid and constantly to have been changing. The danger of settled community is that it might just prepare us insufficiently for versatile and fluid community; we might get the shock of our lives on the other side of the barrier down by the entrance! Indulgent community can become a comfort zone of overwhelming proportions; a place of enforced compliance and therefore false togetherness; and therefore, when things go very badly wrong, a place of meanness of spirit and personal and professional bullying. Perhaps this is why when faced with disciples who are playing dirty off the ball, jostling one another when they think the referee is not looking, Jesus is far from content with the community of competition which the disciples have created. He does what many people involved in conflict resolution usually and rightly seek to do; he isolates the problem, tries to deal with it and puts back on a right path those who are the prime cause of the problem in the first instance. But the damage in the Gospel has already spread to the other ten and, as often is the case, they simply behave as badly as their leaders.

This is how communities work and there is neither earthly nor heavenly reason why CITI is one whit different – unless everyone works at it all of the time. There is the glorious opportunity, of course, all of the time for it to be gloriously different. Let us remember that the only model of leadership that Jesus offers to these feisty and fractious disciples is one of simplicity and service. It is his intention to draw attention to the priority of service over assumptions of leadership which are downloaded from other spheres of life: *You know that among the gentiles the recognized rulers lord it over the subjects, and make their authority felt.* (St Mark 10.41) The word of caution is sounded for those who are commissioned to lead because lead they and, in turn, you and I must; yet it has to be in a spirit of slavery and service. Don't listen to me; just listen to God.

Mark 10.45: *The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*