

Jonathan's Reader Journey

On Saturday 27th February I was licensed as a Reader by Emma the Bishop of Penrith. This should have happened in Carlisle Cathedral but as so many things in this last year, it actually happened from my home on a zoom service. I was licensed with three other Readers from all over the diocese, and another Reader who moved to Cumbria from Surrey.

I have been asked many times, what is a reader? This is a very good question. Readers are lay people in the Church of England, from all walks of life, who are called by God. They are theologically trained and licensed by the Church to preach, teach, lead worship and assist in pastoral, evangelistic and liturgical work. There are over 10,000 readers, with equal numbers of men and women. Their work is varied. In 2016, the church celebrated 150 years of Reader Ministry in the Church of England. To clarify the church jargon, a Lay person is anyone who is not an ordained priest.

My Lay Reader journey can be summed up in three parts, Why? How? What next?

Why?

In its most basic form, God called me to the role. What I mean by that is that I have been an active Christian for over thirty years, but over the last twenty years I have felt called to do more in the church. When we moved to Walney from Millom we started to attend St Mary's church. I was approached by Andy's wife, Julie to think about becoming a Reader, although I didn't really think leading services or preaching or indeed the other roles of a Reader were for me. I was happy using my skills in the church in others ways and had just become church warden. However, after saying no, I kept being drawn back to the idea... it wouldn't go away, which is what I meant when I say God told me to be a Reader. I didn't physically run away like Jonah but I did try to ignore the call of God. I eventually realised that perhaps this is what God wanted me to do, so I went through the application process secretly hoping I would be rejected.

How?

I started out on the training with Cumbria Christian Learning based in Penrith. The official title of the course is a certificate of Higher Education in Theology, Ministry & Mission. This was a two-year course which involved an evening class in Penrith once a fortnight, which was difficult as I needed to be in Penrith 30 minutes after I finished work on Walney, clearly impossible. However, with the help of my boss, and God I was able to alter my shifts so I could attend, although that 90-minute drive was tiring, and I rarely returned home before 10.30pm at night. So that was the pattern of my life for the next eighteen months before Lockdown happened. I then did the last four months of the training by Zoom. The course was split in to 6 modules including Old & New Testament studies and introduction to theology. I also had to do three placements, a three-month placement at St Marys, three months at another church, in my case, Grace Church in Barrow, and a non-church placement. I chose to do my placement with the Chaplaincy team at FGH. I chose it as I wanted to challenge myself, as I'm not the most talkative of people, but once again on my journey God surprised me and I felt at home working in the hospital and visiting patients. So much so that since the placement I have joined the Chaplaincy team as a volunteer, but have been unable to go to the hospital due to covid.

I must confess when I started the training, I felt very inadequate I was the only one there who hadn't been to university, who didn't have a senior management job, or was retired. I felt very much at sea. I found the teaching hard and the essays harder to do. I really struggled to see why I was there, what God wanted from me, but throughout all this I kept leaning on God trusting on him as it says in James 1:5-6

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. ⁶ But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

I suppose this changed during my second term when I did a placement in Grace Church Barrow. Part of the placement was to preach, which I had never done before, and was petrified about. But Robin, the leader of Grace Church, spent time with me and helped me and I did it. Now a Grace church sermon is not 10 minutes like at St Mary's, but 30 minutes and as Robin was doing a series on Genesis, I found myself preaching on the fall of man for my first service. However, I found that I could do it with Gods help, the congregation seemed to like it and I actually enjoyed it. In the next term we had a module on preaching when I had to preach again, it's at this point I realised that I enjoyed preaching, which I have done many times since.

So, after two years and many essays I completed the course and should have been licensed in November which was cancelled due to covid, but I was finally licensed this month.

What next?

The simple answer is that I don't know. I'm completely in God's hands. I just follow his call on my life to the best of my abilities. When I started this journey, the world was a very different place, I assumed that I would be working with Andy in the Parish. Of course, Andy has now moved on just as I qualified and we entered an interregnum. I now work with Fr Jack from St James' and his wife Clare who is also a reader helping to cover services at St Mary's and St John's. I look forward to working with our new vicar, when we get one. In the mean time I will work with Fr Jack and the churchwardens and PCC helping as much as I can. As I said, during the training I found that I actually loved to preach and share my faith and life experience with people. I love explaining the scriptures and how relevant they are for today, and the amazing experiences I have had on my own Christian journey. I would tell you I've had a very ordinary and boring life but when I look back at the countless times God has helped me on my journey and always been there, I have a unique privilege of being able to share that story. I pray that this will help people to see the love of God in their own lives.

While I was writing this, I stopped to take part in night prayer or compline online and tonight's Psalm was number 139, which I feel explains my story in the poetic way of King David. I'd call this a God instance, when God points me in the right direction without me realising it. But I will finish with the first verses of my favourite Psalm 27

"The LORD is my light and my salvation - whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life - of whom shall I be afraid?"

Jonathan Elvy
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