

*Ordination and Induction
of Revd. Pauline Main*

Summertown, Oxford

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Gen. 1:1-10; Jn. 4:4-26

What a true joy it is to be here for this beginning. Pauline has travelled far and devoted herself to preparing for this day and this ministry. It has been my privilege simply to be in at the end of that story, and I am delighted to commend her to you. You are ordaining and inducting a woman of deep faith, keen mind, pastoral sensitivity and gentle humanity. She will bring much laughter through her ministry too, thank God!

So at this moment of beginnings, let us reflect upon the story of a beginning, and the story of a new beginning.

Genesis sets the biblical story into a cosmic beginning. God is revealed as the incredible

creator, shaping space and time, drawing together out of chaos and nothingness something increasingly ordered. And it is so very good. The beauty of it, the sheer audacity and glory of it, delights God.

The writers of Genesis aren't too fussed with Big Bang theory. But I was struck this week with the publication of telescope images that possibly capture the light that has travelled to us from 13.2 billion years ago of six galaxies starting to burn with the light of countless stars. Looking at these images we may be looking at some of the very first stars that ever shone as time and the cosmos began.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

It is a wonder that we are here at all. Genesis reminds us that, alongside anything that astronomy may reveal, we tell another story. It is the good story of the God who creates and shapes and forms and fashions.

God is caught up in this energetic explosion of everything. Genesis opens with the Spirit

of God hovering over the waters. God is not aloof and incognito. God is involved. Genesis unveils the reality that God wants to create and finds creation to be good. So who we are and what we do has to be placed within that divine reality. Everything that we are, everything that Pauline is, flows out of God's wonderful delight in creating.

For years Pauline has journeyed through the process of being called. That's a process David knows well too! God, ever creative, ever surprising, continues to make newness possible. Suddenly we get caught up in all that God is doing and our lives become transformed. Ordination speaks of that reality and gift. This worship reminds us that the Spirit still moves and works and that God continues to astonish us with grace and newness.

But Genesis sets what we do within the big picture of all that God is doing. Our creative God is at work everywhere and through all time. The Church, and every one of us, are simply invited to catch sight of that reality, delight in it, and allow it to overwhelm us with praise and possibility.

Which is why it's wonderful to notice John's little story too.

Just before we get to our text, let's remember how John's gospel starts.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that was made."

We're hearing echoes of Genesis in the story of Jesus. It is as if a new creation is dawning. In the one who wanders the dusty tracks of Galilee the same creative power, the same delight in transforming and changing and making new possibilities catch life is at work.

So here's another pointer. The life of Jesus that we are called to follow and make our own is about a new creative act, a new chapter of possibility and wonder. A new ministry begins today, and we remember that God invites and provokes us in our shared and personal ministries to be endlessly open to the new. Without such openness Pauline

would not be here, and nor would any church. Change is not a problematic distraction, but a gift and a blessing in which God's Spirit works. As much as it celebrates continuity, the Bible champions change. Shouldn't we?

We end our reflections at a well in Sychar on a hot and dry day. And here we witness another new beginning which is a restoration.

For God is restless, and so should we be too. God is restless because creation's goodness, and our infinite possibilities, too often get overwhelmed with sinfulness and our endless limitations. Lives go wrong. Love gets distorted and abused. Hope dies. Friendships collapse. Homes turn into battle fields. Faith gets discouraged. Creation groans and withers beneath our onslaught. And God's glorious creative energies are deflected, ignored or hidden from.

All this God knows so well. And God will not let it be the end. God, ever creative, ever optimistic and opportunistic, intervenes. Jesus waits at the well. The woman arrives

to collect water in the heat of the day. Somehow she is something of an outcast, unwelcome at the well when everyone else gathers when it is cooler. As she and Jesus meet and talk, we witness the wonder of salvation dawning:

"Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst."

With God, grace is unquenchable and love is inexhaustible. And the woman's life is transformed because, in Jesus, she meets one who knows her fully and loves her utterly, one with a gift to offer, one bearing life. God will not give up on her. And, after her encounter with Jesus, she cannot stop inviting everyone in her town to come and meet him too. Conversation with Jesus becomes a journey into mission. Good news for her overflows to become good news for her neighbours.

That's the story we're called to share, and to share in. That's the life we try to live, the one great sermon of our everyday. Let that be the heart of your ministry, Pauline. Let it

be at the heart of each of us in every place and every encounter.

But one more thing strikes me about John's stunning story.

Notice who's missing.

Salvation comes by a well in Sychar. And the disciples are somewhere else. They are busy buying food whilst Jesus is busy giving life. By the time they get back the miracle is well under way.

John has already alerted us to the fact that, with Jesus, grace is out of control. Remember those 6 stone jars turned into finest wine at Cana in his first sign in chapter 2?

God is already at work here long before there is a church or a new minister. Grace already flows and the Spirit is busy.

God simply invites us to join in.