

# St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The First Mass of the Reverend Anita Rooney

**05 July 2023**

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

**Sermon preached by the Reverend Canon Philip Banks**

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I don't know how you would describe 'Church': here's one definition: The 'Church' was and is simply a bunch of women and men, young and old, rich and poor, so impacted by the birth, life, teaching, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, that they formed a community, following him, just trying to make a difference in the world and in the communities and people they came into contact with.

Or you could say Church is like the theatre: for theatre is an *experience* you have – not a *place* you go to. Or – I like Sarah Winman's words about art in her book<sup>1</sup> *Still Life* – Art is not about how well one paints, or the history of a piece (all these things are helpful) or its value: always the value is the response – how it moves you. Art repositions our sight, our judgement – Church should do that too.

Or Malcolm Guite<sup>2</sup> who says that 'faith' is not, strictly speaking, '*mine*' – but something given, willingly received, treasured and responded to. The *response* is mine, but the faith itself, handed on by church, is sheer gift – something not the whole of humanity could have imagined – but a mystery, revealed in passion, death and resurrection – kindling our deepest responses.

Today's Eucharist is a Votive Mass of the Holy Spirit – giving thanks for the gift of the Spirit to kindle in us the fire of God's love and bring the church alive. And those first Christians, fired by the gift of the Spirit given them at Pentecost – they went carrying the message about Jesus to other places, other homes: for them 'Church' was an experience of change (not a place to go – there weren't any churches!), a way of translating the life of Jesus into ordinary day-to-day life and relationships: and not alone – but together, with baptism forging a new family – water now thicker than blood.

They wanted to tell of the person Jesus who walks into your life and (as Mark Oakley puts it<sup>3</sup>) "blasts complacency where it has become oppressive, and creates a calm where struggling lives need assurance and peace".

That is what we – you and me – 'church' gathered here around Word and Sacrament of the Altar – that's what we are invited to: to be on a journey of experience of and response to God's heart of love.

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We – you and me – we are called to be signs – signs of that scandalous, capacious, inclusive hospitality of God’s heart of love. Jesus wants us to have hearts of flesh – that feel the pain and joy of those around us. To know and share the life of Jesus, of a new way of being that defrosts the heart.

For those first Christians – think of Peter and Paul travelling in fragile boats and entering foreign lands – it was hard, starting out on the ministry of the church: where to begin; all the opposition which faced them both from the Romans and from the religious leaders of the day. And – they will have had plenty of doubts and fears.

- Am I ‘good’ enough/Godly enough?? (Peter’s denial of Jesus before the cock crowed must have stayed with him in his heart).
- Will people accept me?? (Paul must have felt that, following his persecution of Christians and his orthodox Jewish background).
- Will I be a success (whatever that is)?
- Will people like me?
- Will I be up to this task of Christian priesthood?

Anita –I have no doubt that some of these same questions may have been floating about for you as you have been preparing for ordination as a priest. It is a joy being your Curacy Training Supervisor – and be assured that they are questions which come to all of us in ministry at different times.

Presiding at the Mass, as you are for the first time today, involves sharing an intimate part of yourself – sharing your relationship with God. Paradoxically, that kind of sharing can be even harder in a community, like this one, where people know you. One minute you’re preaching about patience, and the next you are jumping the queue for coffee. One minute we are encouraging people to respond to poverty or the climate crisis, and then we drive home in a shiny new car. All these tentacles can undermine your confidence and fill you with doubt.

The answer to such doubts lie simply in what happened here at last Saturday’s ordination service.

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Those being ordained, Anita among them, “did” absolutely nothing – apart, perhaps, from remembering the answers to the bishop’s questions.

The Holy Spirit of God did the work.

When the bishop, and that great crowd of priests here with him, laid hands upon Anita, the Holy Spirit came upon her, firmly setting her apart to be a priest, and giving her the strength to do it.

Remember the words of Jesus to the disciples after the resurrection: “as the Father sent me, so send I you”; then he breathed on them and said, “receive the Holy Spirit”.

That is what happened to the disciples, who then travelled to tell others.

That is what happened to Anita and all ordained last week.

The Holy Spirit, let there be no doubt, did his work last Saturday to empower and equip Anita for the work of a priest.

If you believe in a God who is more than just ‘up there’ – a God who is here amongst us, and here within us – then you believe in a God who is active and alive and effective through all of us who are members of the body of Christ, the church. Priests are part of that body of the church – there to be its servant;

– there to feed the church in word and sacrament (Anita doing that today as she presides at the altar);

– there to encourage and enable a new ‘bunch of women and men, young and old, rich and poor’, the church *today*, to be so impacted by the person of Jesus that we too want to make a difference in the lives and communities around us.

Anita: what you are given in your priestly ministry – it is of God.

And the things of God are precious. Holy. None of us here is ‘playing at religion’, or engaging in some eccentric pastime (I hope!). We are dealing with Salvation; New Life; Forgiveness; Restoration; Sacrifice; Healing; Love; Eternity; Truth. In short – God.

May your priestly ministry be blessed.

May you receive God’s Spirit, changing weakness into strength.

And – some in the world may not acknowledge what you are doing; *you* may sometimes have self-doubt or get that ‘impostor syndrome’ feeling. But never forget that you are called and set apart by God as a priest – and God is, and will be, active in you as a priest.

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As we all celebrate here the gift of the Spirit, the gift of faith, the gift of experience and response, may we indeed be people who welcome that same Holy Spirit into our daily lives.

Above all may we know in our hearts that we are surrounded by a great company of saints, Mary, Edmund, James, Peter & Paul – and those we've known in our lifetimes and who have gone before us – walking in the goodness of God's heart of love, who guides, protects and sustains us all in our life's journey, until we see him at the last beyond the veil, face to face.

Anita – like the rest of us –  
there's lots more to learn;  
plenty more to do;  
and lots more to celebrate in the years to come.

And God is with you to inspire you and gently lead you as a priest.  
May he bless you, this day and always.

ENDS

Philip Banks 05 JULY 2023  
*Check against delivery*

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Winman, *Still Life*, HarperCollins 2021

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Guite, *My Theology*, DLT 2021

<sup>3</sup> Mark Oakley, *By Way of the Heart*, Canterbury Press, 2019