

Warden of Readers - Address for Annual General Meeting 22 May 2014

'Honour everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honour the emperor'. I Peter 2.17

I wonder what you make of that exhortation from the first letter of Peter? On this election day – it has its impact upon us in that Mike Lynch, our Secretary, is busy with election administration – what is our place as Christians in the world of Britain and Europe of the 21st Century? What, if anything, do we learn from the attitude of those first Christians, the first ones who had to live in a world that had only just begun to recognise the designation: Christian?

If, as I have suggested before, one meaning of Reader could be 'a reader of the signs of the times', then perhaps we might at least take a view of all this?

I find myself reading passages like this from I Peter with a sense of both inspiration for some of it – perhaps the last verse resonates, for example: 'For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.' – and also of alienation. I mean, 'slaves accept the authority of your masters' – in a world, even our world, in which people are still trafficked into slavery, I don't want them to accept it. I want to protest loudly and strongly against it.

So, with that health warning I just wanted to give thanks, today, for the ministry of Readers in Birmingham Diocese over the past year, and to reflect how you seek to do the above: honour everyone, love the family of believers, fear God and honour the emperor. (For 'emperor' read, 'Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth 11 and the rule of parliament and the institutions which provide stability and prosperity to this nation in the context of Europe and the wider world, including the commonwealth) I don't mention the Queen and institutions lightly – as Christians it is surely our duty to make our views known in the ballot box and to uphold a compassionate and just rule of law, and the fair distribution of wealth.

For Readers do represent a range of experience and a vast network of connections with this world in which the church is set. Remember the very special day we had together at Queens in November with Bishop David. Many re-connected with each other, but our workshops reminded us of the interfaith work we do, of the communications in which we develop our skills (I am so happy our smart new website is up and running) the world of the economy and the workplace (many Readers have some chaplaincy experience) and of the importance of church and community projects across the city and region.

And if, for example, you took a look at the credentials of those who were newly licensed in January 2014, you would find among them connections with Iran and the inner city, teaching and the countryside, entertainment and scouting, outer estates and credit unions, engineering and new motherhood.

The ways in which our selection and training are organised have an impact on the access so many gain to this ministry in this broad and varied context, and with a wide range of educational experiences. This is something we are proud of and which is strongly supported by our bishop. So I am hugely grateful, as we all are, to those who take a part in selection and training: Juliet and the team of selectors, Liz and the tutors, Brian Russell (whom we already miss greatly) and the support and advice of a number of unsung heroes. The committee does what it says, as it were, on the tin: Continuing Ministerial Education (some great stuff here – thanks to Liz, Paul, Janice, Fay and David, and to Bev who has stepped down) and Engagements (thanks Peter) and giving grants for study and paying bills (thanks Chris for handling the finance). Thanks, too, to the excellent support team of Assistant Wardens: Jackie, Paul, Carolyn, Sheila, Bill, Ruth, Ross, Fay, Anne and Jill. But finally, I want to pay tribute to Mike in his absence. The work of Secretary and Registrar is, I hope, a rewarding one, but it is also never ending: databases to update, minutes to write, reminders to send, administrative details in the year's cycle to remember. As he has done year by year he has done this super efficiently, with skill, with a smile, with patience and with dedication. We are blessed indeed by his ministry.

I don't think it too fanciful to see in all this service a holy offering of love, and I mean that of all who are part of this Association here in Birmingham. Yes, here too we can honour everyone, love the

family of believers, fear God and honour the powers that be. By the grace of God it is so, and may the Spirit of God bless our endeavours in the year ahead.

Martin Stephenson