United Dioceses of Cork, Cloyne and Ross

Diocesan Celebration of the Centenary of the Office of Reader

Sermon preached by the Bishop, the Right Reverend Paul Colton
Sunday 29th March 2009 in Saint Fin Barre's Cathedral, Cork

A Reader should only be appointed after it has been established that he is '... no babbler, nor drunkard, nor jester...' I am grateful to the Warden of Readers - the Reverend Bruce Hayes - for digging out that quotation for me! *'... no babbler, nor drunkard, nor jester, of good morals, submissive, of benevolent intentions, first in the assembly at the meetings on the Lord's Day, of a plain utterance, and capable of clearly expounding, mindful that he assumes the position of an Evangelist.'*

The pedigree of the Office of Reader is an ancient one. It goes back much further than the 100 years we are celebrating today.

'When [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. ...' (Luke 4.16)

Jesus chose this moment at the start of his public ministry to show people how he saw his own role and ministry. We can see all eyes on him, as we can on any reader in any liturgy in any time or place; who gets out of his or her seat, walks to the front, stands at the lectern, turns the pages and reads, out loud, the Word of God; and, having read, they pause and return to their seat. It is as routine and as liturgically domestic as that. But more than that, Jesus read what he read, and it made people ask questions: it stirred something deep within them.

Who reads in Church, how they read, and how the Scriptures, prayers and other parts of the liturgy are read, are hugely important concerns. They are important for facilitating worship and nurturing faith. And in the modern sense they are important also because they are about communication. This is a lesson I learnt the hard way as a curate in Belfast. Week by week I went on Sunday evening to celebrate the Eucharist in Clifton House Nursing Home – and then one week, an elderly person, hard of hearing and sitting at the back, turned to her neighbour in the middle of one of the profound and reverent silences and said, 'I don't know why that wee lad bothers coming here, for I can't hear one word he says!'

Yes, the Office of Reader is as old as the hills. Of necessity, there were readers in the Synagogue and the early Christian community. In the Western Church lectors were one of the minor orders; others were porter, exorcist, acolyte and cantor. It was an honoured and dignified office and involved a high standard of education. Canon 8 of one of the Fifth Century canon law formularies sums up well what the role was:

> When a reader is ordained let the bishop speak about him to the people, pointing out his faith and life and skill. After this, while the people look on, let him give him the book from which he is to read, saying to him: Receive this and be the spokesman (*relator*) of

> the word of God and you shall have, if you do your work faithfully and usefully, a part with those who have administered the word of God.

That was centuries ago, but today, with these our Diocesan Readers at the heart of our community, as Bishop, I fulfil that ancient canon: I speak to you of their '...faith and life and skill.' To them we say again: '... be the spokespersons of the Word of God...'

While we can see in these early Church arrangements, the forebears and early genetic material of the modern day Office of Reader what we are talking about today is something that is quite different. Our Readers today do more than read: they preside over whole liturgies; they preach, and some engage in teaching, confirmation preparation and pastoral work.

It's the introduction of this modern Reader movement in the Church of Ireland 100 years ago that we're celebrating today. In April 1907 the General Synod asked the House of Bishops '...to take steps to carry into effect the proposal to insit6ute in the Church of Ireland the Office of Lay Reader; and also to draw out a plan for the establishment of Associations of Lay Helpers.'

On 20th April 1909, the House of Bishops reported to the General Synod. They said that they were 'prepared to recognize the office of 'Lay Reader' within the Church of Ireland; and to license men (*sic*) thereto...' But - as you would expect in the Church of Ireland – there were conditions and rules, and it is good on an occasion such as this to remind ourselves of the original intent and pattern of what was set up, so that we may better reflect on how it is going and how we are doing:

1. Candidates had to be members of the Church of Ireland, or of a Church in communion with the Church of Ireland and a regular communicant.
2. Candidates had to be recommended by the Incumbent of the Parish in which they resided or in which it was proposed that they work.
3. Due enquiry was to be made by the Bishop about their character and general fitness for office and the Bishop was to '...satisfy himself by examination or otherwise as to the candidate's knowledge of Holy Scripture, of the Book of Common Prayer, and of the fundamental Articles of the Christian faith.

Those were the main criteria. And the duties were:

(a) To take such part in conducting the Public Service in the Church as may properly be performed by a layman, and as shall be prescribed by the Incumbent with the sanction of the Bishop.
(b) To hold services for children, either in the Church or in a Schoolhouse or other suitable building; and to give addresses at the same if required by the Incumbent.
(c) To hold or assist at Cottage Meetings, and meetings in the Schoolhouse or other suitable building, when required by the Incumbent.
(d) To hold Bible Classes.
(e) To superintend and teach in Sunday School if required to do so, and to visit the sick and the whole as he may be directed by the Incumbent.

(f) The Reader shall be in all his work under the control and direction of the Incumbent.
(g) The Reader's licence may, at any time, be revoked by the Bishop at his own discretion.
(h) The Reader shall not exercise his office in any Parish except that for which he is licensed, without the consent to the Incumbent of that Parish, or, for special reasons, by directions of the Bishop.
(i) The Reader shall wear a surplice when ministering in the Church or in a licensed place of worship.
(j) The Licence of the Reader shall lapse on the avoidance of the Incumbency of the Parish or Church for which he has been licensed, but many be renewed on the application of the succeeding Incumbent.

This was to be the norm – a licensed reader with a parochial base. But there was also provision for a Diocesan Lay Reader operating directly under the control of the Bishop.

Today, in the presence of our Cork, Cloyne and Ross Readers we can acknowledge that this 1909 vision has been a success. More than that, it is at the heart of the ministry of the Church and the Diocese. Readers, without you we could not function – but necessity is not the foremost reason we value you. We value you for who you are, for the example of faith and commitment you show us, for the way you lead worship, for the journeys and personal sacrifices you voluntarily make, for what we learn from each other, for the things you say in the pulpit, for the solidarity you show with people in the parishes and for the fellowship we enjoy with you as part of the community of the Church here.

One of the most succinct summaries of lay ministry I've come across is in the Preamble Canon 17 of the Anglican Church of Australia:

- ministry is of the essence of the life of the whole body of Christ:
- all baptised persons are called to minister in the Church and in the world
- certain persons called to a public and representative lay ministry within and on behalf of the Church
- it is desirable for the sake of decency and good order within this Church to recognise and regulate certain of those public and representative ministries...

We in the Church of Ireland are better at enabling lay ministry and putting it into practice than we sometimes lead ourselves to believe. In hundreds of different ways, in this Diocese alone, lay people are engaged in lay ministry – children's and youth work, Sunday school, uniformed organisations, at every level of decision making and synodical life, in pastoral care, in liturgical participation and leadership, in administration, in the helping hand and the putting of a job, ability or expertise at the disposal of the Church – the list is endless. This pattern of the ministry of everyone alongside the threefold order of Bishop, Priest and Deacon is how we do God's work in the way our Church does it.

I had the great joy and privilege of being a Reader, commissioned by Bishop Poyntz, to serve in this Diocese. It was his practice to commission ordinands after one year, to give them rooted local experience and practice on their journey towards ordination. Some of the first times I preached were in the pulpits in this Diocese – the first ever was in Frankfield; followed by Sunday duty for the late David Woodworth in Rathclaren and

Innishannon. I remember the sermon well – it was about David and Goliath. Around that time too the Guild of Readers held a day in the Chapel of Saint Luke's Home – then still on Military Hill.

The speaker was the Dean of Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin – Dean Tom Salmon. He came to teach us how to preach. He gave us three Latin words which I have never forgotten: *placere* – to please; *docere* – to teach and *movere* – to move. It was a model of preaching he commended to us: please them (attract their attention); teach them something; move them, motivate them to go and do something.

My 'babblers, drunkards and jesters...' at the outset were designed to catch your ear – placer. The main chunk of this sermon on this particular day, of interest and necessity has been a teaching retrospect about how we came to be here at this celebration today. But that in itself brings me to my *movere* - my motivating points – my few challenges to us all as we go out today:

First, it goes without saying, I hope, that we must continue to value, encourage and show gratitude, not only to our Readers, but to all engaged in voluntary lay ministry within the Church.

Second, it is a day to ask what can you do? Are there people here who should be thinking of joining in this ministry? These people will not always be here to do it. Where is the next generation of Readers?

Third, where do Readers come from when we need them? Why should it always be from someone else's parish, why not from your won parish? Could God be calling you? Could we return here in ten years time and by then have achieved the target of having at least one Reader in every parish and alongside every place of ministry in the Diocese?

Fourth, let us be positive and confident in our self-assessment and perspective of the immeasurable role lay people already do have in the ministry of the Church of Ireland, and let us build on that.

My fifth and final point relates to the good economic times that our country has recently crashed out of. If we are honest, in those times, many of us became lazy about voluntary work. When there was that bit more money, we began to pay people to do things that previously had been done by volunteers. Now – of necessity – more than that – as get a healthier perspective back on things – I believe it is time once again to recover a balanced spirit of voluntary work once again – not exploitation of goodwill, but a balanced offering and accepting of the God-given talents of each one of us for the good of Christ's Church.

Readers! You have worked away faithfully and quietly all these years, modelling for us a pattern of faithfulness, creativity and self-offering. On behalf of us all in the Church in this Diocese I ask you to stand up – take a bow – thank you – and may everyone here show their gratitude, in God's name, to you!