

## 'Even the demons submit to us in your name.'

(Wakefield Cathedral- 6.10.07- Readers' relicensing  
Josh 22:1-6; 2 Tim 1:1-14; Luke 10:17-24)

1. 'Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.'
2. A reader's licence does not convey authority to conduct exorcisms even in the go ahead diocese of Wakefield. Yet helping to bring demons under submission is the calling of every Christian and especially those called to public ministry in the Church.
3. Until I came to work for the Church five years ago all of my professional life was in Whitehall. Playing a small part in trying to bring peace to Northern Ireland in the early nineties and again a decade later with Peter Mandelson and John Reid taught me a lot about evil and its destructive power. After thirty years of the troubles people yearned for the demons of politically motivated violence to be brought under submission.
4. I also spent many years working with Ministers in the old Home Office on almost equally sombre problems. We grappled constantly with the challenges of crime, public disorder and terrorism, gaining some ground here, averting a disaster there but never able to bring under submission those demons each with their origins deep within human nature.
5. For a while in the late 80s, I worked in the Prison Service Headquarters and sometimes came to Wakefield to the Prison Service College next to the prison in the strangely named Love Lane, and to the officer training school then at Aberford Road. Things seemed difficult then with 50,000 people in custody. Now the prison population stands at 80,000 and official projections suggest that it could exceed 100,000 within seven years.
6. On bad days it is easier to pray that God's kingdom will come on earth at it is in heaven than to believe that it is likely to happen any time soon. As members of a Church that has overall been losing numbers for most of the last hundred years we can also feel daunted at the sheer scale of the task. Certainly as we compare our situation with that described in our three Scripture readings it is hard not to feel just a little bit jealous.

7. In our Old Testament reading Joshua talks to a people that have successfully entered the Promised Land and says, in effect, mission accomplished, now go home and enjoy the time of rest that God promised. In 2 Timothy Paul is full of thanksgiving, confidence and encouragement. Here is someone who, whatever the obstacles, is on fire with a passion to share the news that 'Christ Jesus has destroyed death and has brought immortality to light through the gospel.' In our Gospel reading we hear that the 70 (or 72) return from their mission with joy, because the power of God has been visibly at work through their preaching and healing. 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven' declares Jesus after their return.
8. This morning's service has not been arranged to make any of us feel jealous or try to carry burdens that we cannot bear. It's a moment to come back briefly to base and be honest about what's been going well and what's been going less well.
9. In the 30 years since I was admitted reader as a very young man in the diocese of London my ministry has gone through various phases in three different churches, two of them in the diocese of Southwark. There have been lean years as well as years of plenty. Whichever phase you are in, take encouragement and challenge from this morning's three readings.
10. First, remember that you are not alone. Each of these passages is about the **people of God working together in community**, the tribes of Israel, Paul and Timothy, the 70 returning from a task that Jesus had sent them out to do two by two. Note the words, 'even the demons submit to **us** in your name.' 'Us' not 'me'. 2 Timothy 1:7 God did not give **us** a spirit of humility.'
11. As readers we are not meant to be lone rangers. Along with 10,000 other readers in the Church of England, each one of us is entrusted with a responsibility by the Church just as the 70 were given a commission by Jesus himself. While individual initiative and personal commitment are essential they are not sufficient. We each have to operate as members of the body of Christ, knowing our role and respecting that of everyone else who prays for God's kingdom to come.
12. One issue we sometimes struggle with is how concerned we should be to nurture a distinctive identity for ourselves as readers. In a nutshell my advice would be 'don't overdo it'. At the annual

relicensing event that I attend in Southwark, the most discouraging part is always when we talk about ourselves and reader issues. Far more energising is when we learn from each other about the varieties of ways our churches are seeking to proclaim the good news of the kingdom in South London. Twenty years ago the church where I now worship was scheduled for redundancy. Now it's one of the largest churches in south London with nearly 5000 on the electoral roll.

13. Of course sometimes we find ourselves in situations where our own needs require attention. I was in a situation twenty years ago where the three readers and most of the congregation had serious difficulties with a vicar. It was very painful and in those moments we needed all the advice and wisdom we could get, including from our own area bishop who was immensely supportive. But except in those exceptional and usually quite short-lived instances the less we focus on ourselves and the more we share what God is doing through the whole body of Christ, of which we are just one part, the more encouraged we are.
14. It's interesting that Luke records the sending out of the 70 just one chapter after the twelve are sent out with an almost identical commission to preach, heal and proclaim the kingdom of God. Why did he appoint these additional people? Because there was a huge task and not enough labourers to do it. Let's keep our eye on the task and rejoice that we, with all God's people, can have a part in that, without getting too bothered about the distinctiveness of having been called to the office of reader. As other lay ministries flourish let's not have a closed shop mentality but simply give thanks that others wish to take their discipleship seriously and join us in an enterprise that's big enough for all of us.
15. So, first, remember that we are most effective in community. Second- **focus on results but don't make them the ultimate source of our confidence.** Luke 11:20 'Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you; but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.' This is something we struggle with greatly. The spirit of the age is about accountability. The Charity Commission will increasingly be pressing all charities, including churches and religious charities, to demonstrate that we are achieving outcomes rather than simply existing.

16. From where I sit at Church House, Westminster I see a significant division of opinion between those who think numbers matter and see statistics as a tool for mission and those who associate them with managerialism rather than Gospel. It's a polarisation, like so many of our internal arguments that is rather depressing. Of course statistics have their limits and of course there are many different ways of proclaiming the kingdom.
17. But if we are ministers of the Gospel surely we have to be concerned about results. Surely we have to grieve for the decline that nearly all of the Christian churches in Western Europe have experienced over the past century. As we look around at the dislocation, dissatisfaction and family breakdown in our society we have to feel something of the pain that Jesus experienced when he looked over Jerusalem and wept. Suffering, as our epistle reminded us, is the guaranteed consequence of being a minister of the Gospel: 'For this gospel I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, **and therefore** I suffer.'
18. We must not be so skilled at constructing defence mechanisms that we try to insulate ourselves from the sufferings of the whole Body of Christ. And yet we must not let ourselves be destroyed when there is hard and apparently unrewarding toil. If it was possible for civil servants and ministers to keep up their spirits in Northern Ireland during the dark days surely we who believe in the resurrection of the dead and the communion of saints can keep ourselves from losing heart. 'I know whom I have believed,' says Paul and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.' 'Do not rejoice in this that the spirits are subject to you' says Jesus, 'but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'
19. Thirdly and very simply, **don't be half-hearted**. Joshua in our OT passage knew exactly what the temptation was as the people of Israel settled into the promised land after a long journey: 'Be very careful to keep the commandment of the law that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you: to love the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to obey his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and all your soul.'
20. When we reach a certain age our bodies tell us to slow down a bit. If we resist, they have ways of reminding us that it's our children now who are 25 not us. So, we do need to be honest about the

changing scenes of life. But growing older is not the same as growing slack. Each age brings new opportunities as well as new frustrations- and let's be honest there were some frustrating things about how things used to be when we were younger- something the people of Israel were very good at forgetting the moment they left Egypt.

21. 'Hold fast to him,' said Joshua. 'Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you' wrote Paul. 'Guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in you.'
22. I suspect that in a few weeks we shall be reminded that, sixty five years ago, on 1 December 1942, an important document was presented to Parliament. In those sober days when spin meant Headley Verity bowling on a turning wicket at Headingley and politicians were not so deeply into marketing, the Government allowed it to have the admirably dull but truthful title a 'Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services'.
23. Despite that lack of marketing flair and a cover price of two shillings it sold 100,000 copies within a month. The Beveridge Report, as it has been known ever since, offered new hope for a nation that had endured the economic devastation of the 1930s and the literal devastation of three years of war. It caught the mood of the moment, six weeks after El Alamein, when there was at last a victory to celebrate and the beginnings of a conviction that better times might one day come again.
24. The vision in that report was based on Beveridge's determination to slay what he described as five giant evils- want, ignorance, disease, squalor and idleness. Social insurance, a health service, free secondary education, new housing and full employment were to be the means by which Jerusalem would be built in England's green and pleasant land. At last the demons would be brought under submission.
25. Few now would question the boldness of Beveridge's vision or the huge advance that the welfare state, for all its shortcomings, represented on what had gone before. Yet as we look around us, sixty five years on, the demons still seem remarkably vigorous. Debt, drunkenness, drugs, disorderly and anti-social behaviour, the decline of religious faith and observance all continue to take their

toll on our society. The New Jerusalem to which the Beveridge report was meant to lead still seems out of reach.

26. As we come to Communion we commemorate a far greater victory than Alamein. Let us each recommit ourselves to a project more ambitious even than that offered by Beveridge and the welfare state, no less than bringing the demons under submission as we work and pray for the coming of the Kingdom of God. For he 'did not give us a spirit of timidity but of power- of love and self-discipline.'