

## **Sermon for 8 July, 2018 : Yunghee Koh's First Mass at St Mary's, Wimbledon**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Please be seated.

First I must thank Mandy and Yunghee for inviting me to join you in worship today as Yunghee celebrates the Eucharist for the first time. It's a joy to be with you.

Our readings today speak to us of calling and listening. Of discernment and testing. Of sending and journey. Of challenge and endurance. Of authority and responsibility and obedience. Of empowerment and risk.

These were all things our Lord himself experienced. And indeed, every Christian experiences some or all of these things in their journey of faith and discipleship.

For Jesus and his first disciples, and for many Christians still today, this journey can even demand putting their life at risk.

But here, in this country, we have a much easier time of it in so many ways.

We're free to worship without fear of physical threat, and, largely, without even ridicule. Neither persecuted nor restricted. Ours is the officially recognised majority faith of the nation in the established Church of England.

The Christian faith is also embedded in our national traditions, our holidays, our civic life, our literature, our language, our aphorisms. We also have easy access to the Bible in different English translations and just about any other language we choose.

We have access, too, to a huge range of spiritual and theological writings, from short and easy reads, to the most demanding academic tomes.

And we can learn even more about our faith and practice it by joining Bible study groups, prayer groups and Christian social action groups. We can even study the faith formally at every level right up to postgraduate degrees.

And we can find places of Christian worship wherever we live or visit. Our city and country skylines are everywhere punctuated with spires and church towers.

Indeed, with all these blessings, anyone looking from the outside might expect the Christian faith to flourish abundantly in our homes, our streets, our places of work, our whole society, and our hearts.

And yet it is not so. At every census, the proportion of professed Christians in our population is shrinking, and much faster than can be accounted for by the increasing numbers of those of other faiths.

No, in this country, the challenges to our faith and discipleship are not lack of freedom, opportunity, tradition or resource, or down to population shift.

Rather, the two biggest challenges to Christianity are busyness and indifference : the pace and complication and demands of life, making it difficult to find the time to step back, to reflect, to listen and respond in faith to God. And then, the general indifference to faith – by others and by ourselves.

Christianity isn't so much ridiculed as ignored, or at best tolerated without interest. Perhaps, here in London and in other big cities, these two challenges are most pronounced : we go about so engaged with our phones and tablets and e-readers that we don't engage or take notice of much else around us.

A few weeks ago, a BBC programme made this point rather strikingly. It was about the Neanderthals, the ancient forerunners of our own species. You may have seen it too.

As part of their investigation, they padded up a short man and made up his face so that he looked like a Neanderthal. Then they put him in a suit and tie and sent him into the London Underground. They secretly filmed him making his way in and out of busy stations, on the platforms and in a crowded tube carriage.

And no one took a blind bit of notice. They were too absorbed in their thoughts and plans, and in their phones and tablets. They were busy. They were indifferent. They didn't notice. And they couldn't care.

In the same way, people simply don't pay much attention to the Christian message. They just don't notice. Especially people who haven't had any experience of the Christian tradition. And who don't know any Christians who live and speak of their faith.

This indifference of others can sometimes make us Christians reticent or embarrassed about making our faith known. And we're often too busy and distracted ourselves to make the effort.

And so, we end up colluding with the busyness and indifference of others. And the word and the work of the Lord become increasingly less known.

These two challenges of busyness and indifference are tough ones to tackle, partly because we're so distracted and oblivious that we don't even notice the impact they're having on our own life of faith.

We so easily fail to venture out of our comfort zone, to take risks and to make ourselves vulnerable in his name. Which is exactly what he asked of his first disciples to do in our Gospel reading today. And asks of us, too.

It is, as they say, 'a big ask'.

But here, at St Mary's, you have an extra blessing beyond all those I mentioned earlier. A blessing which, if you recognise and make use of it, may prove a powerful support in helping you value your faith anew and live it and share it with renewed commitment.

I know this, because I've already benefitted from this blessing myself.

The blessing that you specially have is your new priest, Yunghee.

Because the Lord has given Yunghee the great gift of being able to step well out of her own comfort zone in his name.

She has come to faith and nurtured it and remained true to it in circumstances very different from ours, in spite of obstacles and challenges we've never had to face, and, until very recently, without all the benefits and advantages that we enjoy as Christians in this country.

Some of you will probably already know something of her story. And I don't intend to tell the whole of it here.

She's a very self-effacing person and would only be embarrassed. But I encourage you to ask her about her faith journey.

About how she came to know the Lord in spite of growing up in and moving to countries where the main faith was not Christianity and where Christians are few and far between. How she took the huge step with her husband, Taeseok, to come to this country in response to his calling as a pastor. How she supported him in his ministry to the Korean people in this country.

How she used her gifts to learn the English language better, obtain qualifications, get a good job to support their growing family, and adjust to a culture very different from any she had previously known.

And yet, she still found – and finds – time to reflect, to pray, to study the scriptures, and to listen to the Lord. And, in recent years, to hear and respond to his call to ordained ministry, and to remain committed to the truth of that calling.

Even though the process of discernment in the Church of England was long and demanding, and training a real test of endurance and stamina, not just physical, but mental and emotional, too.

Yunghee, this quiet, gentle and diffident woman, has a proven courage and grit and resilience in her faith that I, for one, hold in awe and am deeply inspired by.

Yes, she has been and continues to be very busy in ministry and in raising her family. But her faith is the life of her heart. And the heart of her life. She's never indifferent to it, and always generous with it.

I know she would say that the Lord has been specially generous to her too, in accompanying and strengthening her in her journey to this day. Today. When he sends her among us with the new authority which he has vested in her, through the Holy Spirit and the laying on of hands, through the generations of apostolic succession from our Lord himself.

A new authority he bestows upon her so that he might live among us through his sacraments of consecration, absolution and blessing, and the loving care of his people.

This is a wonderful beginning for Yunghee and for all of us, especially those of you who will continue to receive her ministry here at St Mary's. And, if you will, learn from her how to make your love of the Lord and your faith more central to your life and allow it to become more powerful than busyness and indifference.

So that you can step more courageously out of your own comfort zones to reach out more actively to our busy and indifferent society and help them come to know the peace and the joy of God's love which passes all understanding.

Yunghee is a gift from the Lord to you. but please don't forget that you're also his gift to her.

Yesterday, in the ordination service at All Saints, the Bishop reminded her that:

*You cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength, but only by the grace and power of God.*

And he reminded all of us who minister with her and receive her ministry to support her, especially through prayer.

And so today, we pray for Yunghee and for ourselves, that, especially as she calls upon the presence of our Lord to come among us, and as he shares himself with us once more in and through this Eucharist, we will together enter once more into his healing love, and give thanks that he continues to call and to send priests to his people.

And that he has given us the great privilege and joy of welcoming among us this new priest today and of receiving the sacrament for the first time from her hands and, I know, from her heart.

As she leads us once more in making our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, let us also remember that the Lord is calling each of us, and every Christian. Choosing us and equipping us to go out from this place in his name into the world, to share in his ministry of love and reconciliation and healing, in the ways which each of us, with our own particular gifts and in our own circumstances, uniquely can do.

So let us pray for Yunghee and for ourselves, that in the power of the Spirit we may all continue to listen for and hear his voice, respond with joy, and support each other in our witness to his kingdom breaking through, until the Lord comes again.

In his name and with his love, let us step out of our comfort zones. And may his grace be sufficient for us. Amen.

**Readings :****OT : Ezekiel 2.1-5**

He said to me, “Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you.” As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.

He said: “Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have been in revolt against me to this very day. The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says.’ And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious people—they will know that a prophet has been among them.

**NT : 2 Corinthians 12.2-10**

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. Though if I wish to boast, I shall not be a fool, for I shall be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these superlative apostles, even though I am nothing. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you in all patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.

**Gospel : Mark 6.1-13**

He went away from there and came to his own country; and his disciples followed him. And on the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue; and many who heard him were astonished, saying, “Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. And Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honour, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house.” And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them. And he marvelled because of their unbelief.

And he went about among the villages teaching.

And he called to him the twelve, and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. And he said to them, “Where you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. And if any place will not receive you and they refuse to hear you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet for a testimony against them.” So they went out and preached that men should repent. And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them.