

## **SERMON**

*preached by the Dean at Chelmsford Cathedral  
at the Installation of Imogen Nay as a Residentiary Canon  
Trinity Sunday, 16 June 2019*

My old friend Nigel went on holiday in Sharm el Sheik and took the bus trip to the monastery of St Katharine at Sinai. The monastery is said to have been built around the burning bush that appears in tonight's first reading, and it (or its successor) stands in the monastery precinct to this day, an object of wonder and veneration.

Nigel brought me back a picture of the burning bush, and asked me to look hard at it. What was the joke, the secret? Where was Wally? Well, not there as it turned out. Nigel pointed to the bottom left hand corner. A bright red fire extinguisher. The monks of St Katharine's, some 3,000 years after the original event, are genuinely anxious that the bush will start burning all over again.

God makes a call on us, just as he made a call on Moses. Just as today we celebrate Imogen's response to the call God has made on her to become the first ever Canon for Evangelism and Discipleship here at Chelmsford Cathedral.

Imogen doesn't have to take her shoes off here - though this is holy ground, and in winter taking your shoes off is great because the heating is all in the floor.

This is holy ground without boundaries, open to all; space for worship, for hospitality, for service, for the High Sheriff and for the homeless, for conversation, argument, study, learning, music, tears, laughter, dancing. Space where people come like

Nicodemus by night searching for a God they already know but perhaps cannot yet name.

And it is into this holy space and the network of possibilities it contains that we welcome Imogen tonight.

We welcome her first as Canon. Canon is a Greek word meaning rule. In a cathedral the Dean and Canons are a group of priests living under a common rule. Hence the word canon. It's not a hierarchy word about who is more important. It's a word about the Christian community that stands or sits or kneels at the heart of the life of the Cathedral.

So what is the rule, the canon, that Canon Imogen Nay is being installed to today? Imogen takes on a whole series of responsibilities as a member of this community for governance, executive function. If she wants, she can even go on the cake rota.

But the basis of our life together as Dean and Canons, our rule here, is the daily prayer; meeting together twice each day to sing the praises of God; daily prayer as the beating heart of the Cathedral's life, the foundation for its mission.

So we have invited Imogen to become a Canon here, living under our common rule. But we have also invited her to look at the Cathedral and its life through a particular lens, to take on a particular work and responsibility for Evangelism and Discipleship. We are inviting Imogen to help us pay attention to these key themes in the life of the cathedral in the service of our mission and ministry.

So if Canon is the first word, the second is Evangelism. I know it's a word that's meant to scare Anglicans, but it's not a technical word for a certain set of activities. It's simply the "good news" word. Evangel just means "good news" or gospel. For Christians the content of that good news is found in the words and deeds of Jesus - in the way he breaks down barriers, welcomes the stranger, kneels to wash servants' feet before they feast. And of course the way he invites all of us to join in.

Imogen's role as Canon for Evangelism is to focus this work in a strong way for us: to lead, to teach, to enable others to be heralds of this good news, inviting others to share in the fullness of life that Jesus holds out as promise and invitation to all of us; and to embed this work across every part of the life of this Cathedral.

And the third word, Discipleship. That's become a bit of a buzz word in the contemporary church. But "disciple" just means "learner". It's the L plate word. An early writer called the Christian community "A school of the Lord's service". It's an urgent task for us - living now in the most secularised culture in the world - to rediscover this, the church as a learning community where all are invited to grow, to be formed in a whole way of life.

The "learner" word, disciple, tells us that Imogen's role is to focus this work and responsibility for us - to invite people to go deeper in their faith, to be learners in this school, to launch out into the deep.

Back to Sinai and the burning bush. A student once asked me "do you think the Bush was always burning? And it was just

this time Moses noticed?" It's a great question for Imogen, our new Canon for Evangelism and Discipleship; a great question for this Cathedral in the heart of a city which welcomes thousands across the threshold in search of a God they already know but cannot yet name. And a great question for a group of Dean and Canons whose job is not to venerate the ashes but to tend the living flame.