

# I was in Perth and it meant this to me

Incredulous disbelief as we processed the judgment of the Court - the sound of breath being expelled, like air escaping from a balloon. Is it really true, does he really mean it?

Incoherent delight, walking away from the Court. I remember the quintessential expression of joy seen years ago in the television production of Frederick Raphael's *Glittering Prizes*, when Tom Conti moves into an Israeli dance of celebration, mimic his action and get caught by the television cameras. I wonder if the movement conveys for others the thrill of the moment.

Compassion when I see an opponent of the ordination waiting, with fixed face, swallowing hard, for the start of the meeting for clergy called by the Archbishop. How can I connect with him in a way that is helpful for him without being open to the charge of gloating or hypocrisy? Perhaps I can't right now. The rift between positions on the issue takes on new meaning.

Between Friday 5 pm and Saturday 9 am, it's like living in limbo. Will it really happen? What are the opponents trying now? I am reminded of the sense of holding my breath that I had, as a child, between Good Friday and Easter Day.

The ordination service was a curious mix between the usual and the amazing. We've been here, done this .... and yet, not. The moment for each woman, of actual ordination, had a sense of rightness - a solemn moment irrespective of the fact that history was being made.

As the service progressed, I felt the new sense of wholeness, of liberation, was almost tangible. It was as though the Church had become complete and transformed joyous energy would be released into the world.

On a more sombre note, I also became aware of the consequences of this act for the Australian Anglican Church. The stark contrast between east and west - would it be helpful and life-giving? I felt anxious about the existence of the rift for the newly ordained priests who would be the focus of immense scrutiny and assessment, for those who support the ordination of women and yet for whom the way ahead is barred, and for those opposed.

I was there and yet in a way it is still hard to believe it has happened. It's an odd feeling, experiencing a woman preside at the Eucharist, knowing it is a new event yet feeling it is old and familiar, rooted in our tradition and our faith. **Theresa Harvey**

## A memorable 40th birthday

I was chopping fruit salad, and praying, the day Archbishop Peter Carnley ordained the first ten women to the priesthood in the Anglican Church of Australia. You see, I was to turn 40 next day. I'd arranged a series of celebrations from here to Melbourne ( about 250 km ) to celebrate the event because "life", they say, "begins at 40". There were so many lovely gifts and a couple of poignant ones. None, however, eclipsed the gift that Saturday's ordination in Perth was for me.

In those two hours in which the ordination of women to the priesthood took root in Australian soil my song changed from lamentation and exile:

*"How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" ( Ps 137:4 )*

to one of utter rejoicing and homecoming:

*"I was glad when they said to me,*

*Let us go to the house of the Lord.*

*And now our feet are standing*

*Within your gates, O Jerusalem" ( Ps 122:1-2 ).*

Twenty-six years of struggle and pain, and of being in a church where law, constitution, and the idol of well-intentioned but utterly oppressive unity, had become more important than the gospel fell

away. Like Bunyan's Christian, I experienced liberation in those hours. In the end, that I was here in Charlton, on the edge of the Mallee, rather than in Perth, did not matter. The chorus:

*"Bind us together, Lord,*

*Bind us together,*

*With cords which cannot be broken"*

achieved a new level of depth and meaning as I spent those hours alone in my kitchen. Peace flowed in to me as the extraordinary nature of that Perth event passed solemnly and gently into the ordinary, yet always special, experience of ordination.

The day held its own fears and sadnesses. Would the service go without incident? My heart and prayer were full, too, of Bishop Owen and the eleven women of Canberra and Goulburn. Those two groups of women shared the journey of my love and prayer as St. George, alias Archbishop Carnley, slayed some mighty and strong dragons that day. He did it all with such love, such passion, and such elegance.

Highlights for me of the service which I saw afterwards were these:  
- Robert Milne, the man ordained: his gift of reticence until he could be ordained with Teresa brought new levels of richness to the

commitments of marriage and priesthood.

- In the ordination of the woman with arthritis I saw one who had become so deeply representative of all who bear the burdens of pain. In her priesting she became the banner of hope and prayer for God's people.

- To see Kaye, one of the original eight woman deacons, was so special. What a wonderful role model she is for her girls at Perth College as she brings the vocations of marriage, motherhood, education and now priesthood before her students. Their tears and joy were evident.

- The presentation of the newly ordained, looking splendid in the clothing of the Holy Spirit, was indeed tear-making stuff.

- The re-writing of "Jerusalem" brought shivers of exaltation and hope to my whole being, as did the part of the sermon we were able to hear.

So, on the Feast of St Perpetua, Felicity and their companions, women who chose fidelity to God's call rather than the easy option of letting go of faith, we celebrated the end of years of martyrdom for ten of our number.

And, on my birthday, as I stood at each of "my" three altars, vested in dalmatic, with reserved sacrament for God's people here with whom I share my life, I felt such joy for ten congregations around the Diocese of Perth. For them, ten new priests, who happened to be women, would for the first time represent Christ liturgically in the breaking of bread and the pouring out of wine. In doing so they would enable people to see an enrichment of priesthood.

The isolation of the "desert" of Charlton is God's appointed place for my unceasing prayer for the work of the Spirit in bringing this event to birth in the rest of his church here. With rekindled hope I now long for the day when the event of Perth becomes incarnate in my own life and journey.

Life certainly began at 40 for me.

**Carlie Hannah**

## Australian Summer 1992

Late November to March is "ordination season" in the Anglican Church of Australia. Since December 1986, bishops have ordained numerous men priests after a short year as deacons while rejecting women who have been their peers or seniors in experience.

On occasion, declaring their exasperation at legal and constitutional ambiguities, certain bishops had announced quite specific dates and times at which they would ordain women to the priesthood. David Penman (Melbourne) planned a time in February 1990; Peter Carnley (Perth) in December 1989 and March 1992; Owen Dowling (Canberra-Goulburn) in February 1991 and again February 1992. Several other bishops were more vague: "before next General Synod", or "Before the end of the year". (The Archbishop of Melbourne recently announced "after October" - the sceptical rejoinder is "and before when?" Only Peter Carnley has carried out his intention, at the second attempt.

The broad sequence of events from announcements to litigation to ceremony in both the dioceses of Canberra-Goulburn and Perth was widely reported overseas. Briefly, in early December 1991 the Appellate Tribunal failed to give a decisive answer as to whether diocesan or General Synod authority was necessary for the ordination of women as priests. Presuming therefore the validity of his diocesan legislation and pessimistic about the likelihood of General Synod resolving the issue, Bishop Owen Dowling of Canberra-Goulburn announced on 23 December that he would ordain eleven women deacons priest on 2 February 1992 in St Saviour's Cathedral, Goulburn.

In late January three members of General Synod

(including a priest in his diocese) sought a court injunction to stop the ceremony, an action that dismayed many opponents of women's ordination. The judge refused the application, declining to condone discrimination based on gender and act against the United Nations' Declaration on Human Rights. Within minutes the plaintiffs appealed and the NSW Court of Appeal granted an interlocutory injunction against the service until the case could be heard in full. (It was heard in April; judgement, coming two days before the beginning of the July General Synod, was given in favour of Bishop Dowling.) Two days later, the diocesan ordination was held, but only men were ordained. It was held in the presence of people who had travelled from around the country and the globe to be present at the first ordination of women as priests in Australia. The service booklet was the one printed for the festive occasion, with a few amendments.

A fortnight earlier, several thousand kilometres away in Perth, Archbishop Carnley had announced that he would ordain ten women in Perth on 7 March, convinced that changes made to the diocesan constitution and legislation made it possible. His announcement drew little attention in the eastern states which were absorbed in the drama being played out there. Several weeks of speculation about a legal challenge followed. Several days before the ordination date, the challenge came, delayed a crucial twenty-four hours (it is said) by an irascible fax machine. The case was heard in the West Australian Supreme Court twenty-four hours before the ordination. The judge refused to grant the application to stop the service and ruled out an appeal. Seventeen hours later, the first ordination of women to the priesthood in the Anglican Church of Australia took place. Ten women and one man

who had delayed until his wife could also be ordained were ordained priest.

It would be facile to see one occasion as a failure to ordain women (a disaster), the other, the first ordination of women to the priesthood in Australia (a great celebration). If only it were that simple.

Some unexpected, unpleasant surprises occurred in both ceremonies which illustrate vividly just how much there is still to do so that women are visible and equal. In the Perth ceremony, there were shocking lapses in the language about God's people: "for us *men* and for our salvation" in the creed and "for none can guess its grace, / til *he* become the place" in a hymn, to name two. As usual, inconsistency prevailed, so "all people" replaced "mankind" in the ordination rite itself. However, language about God, at least in the hymns, was surprisingly inclusive - there were relatively few references to God as "he" and "him". By contrast in the hymns we sang in the Goulburn non-ordination, almost every line of almost every hymn referred to God as "he".

The ordination of the ten women notwithstanding, the Perth ceremony was regrettably memorable for its domination by *clergymen*. The ordinands were almost the only women in the two long processions. Only men distributed communion. Men read two of the three lessons. The gentlest, most tender moments of the service were the vesting in chasubles of the new priests by Theresa Harvey, director of field education in the diocese. Virtually invisible to the congregation, they were captured exquisitely on the television coverage and were the most memorable of the entire service.

The service in Goulburn was in some ways, for all its horror, more inclusive. Two of the three lessons were read by women; there were far more women in the sombre procession; communion was distributed by the women who should have been ordained priest. That helped a little.

Perhaps the biggest contrast other than the obvious one lay in the energy and emotion involved in each. The cabinet minister responsible for the status of women in Australia had said that Bishop Dowling and the women deacons had "captured the hearts and minds of ordinary Australians"; day after day there was intense interest in the progress of the legal proceedings throughout the Australian community. On February 2, the non-ordination was marked in some striking way in every major city and many provincial centres. News bulletins carried extensive reports from around the nation of statements, sermons and gatherings protesting the non-ordination. Hundreds of people gathered at a church near the cathedral to hear speeches from Bishop Dowling, women from the United States and New Zealand, and Caroline Davis from the United Kingdom. There were banners and singing as the people marched to the cathedral for the non-event.

The contrast in Perth was remarkable. Archbishop Carnley's late January announcement of his intention was not immediately picked up in the eastern states' press and then reported only briefly; most attention remained on

Canberra. After the Goulburn experience many people dared not believe that the ordination would go ahead - the cost had been so high, although at least there was not the shameful and distress of another ordination of men and a non-ordination of women. There was no public meeting in Perth called to support Archbishop Carnley, no rally planned for the day irrespective of what happened, as had happened in Canberra Diocese. News of developments travelled through traditional networks, rather than the journalists as it had done in Canberra. The two hour time distance and the physical distance added to the sense of remoteness. The overseas travellers had long gone home.

The late Friday decision of the Western Australian Court to refuse the injunction against the ordination came too late for some people to reach Perth early Saturday morning - quite a statement about transport across Australia. Dr Patricia Brennan, MOW Founding President, caught a plane, by just millimetres; so fearful of missing the last flight was she that she left her luggage in the car at the airport to save microseconds! It was very different from the Goulburn preparations.

Lastly the differences in mood outside the two cathedrals was unexpected. In Goulburn, sorrow and anger found an outlet in speeches and singing before the service and tears during it. There were crowds of people milling around. In Perth, there was a very quiet, orderly queue - mainly late middle-aged and elderly women, and neatly uniformed school girls. Standing in its midst, Patricia Brennan began a Soweto freedom song but no-one joined in. As she said, "Even to hum in this queue would be a radical act." That summed up the situation exactly.

The messages?

*First*, that those bishops who support women as priests should not ordain any more men priest until such time as they ordain women. To have ordained men priest but not the women was, irrespective of the intention, absolutely indefensible.

*Secondly*, that the ordination of women may be essential for transforming the church community into a place of safety, recognition and comfort for women, but it is not sufficient.

*Finally*, that even with the best intentions, church leaders still do not grasp all the dimensions of the ordination of women as the liturgies attested. As the Rev Caroline Pearce said, "We have had an ordination of women, but not a women's ordination." Perhaps next time, whenever that might be.

**Janet Scarfe**

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