*I’d like to begin by saying what an honour and a privilege it is to be asked to preach at this very special service, and to be the Dean of Women’s Ministry as we reach this anniversary.*

One of the ways we know that a group of people are generally misunderstood is that they’re only ever represented in cliches and caricatures. As the general disconnect between modern society and the Christian faith becomes more pronounced, cliches about Christians in general and clergy in particular become more prevalent. Back in the seventies, Anglican clergy were generally portrayed on TV as ineffectual, a bit wet, as easily shocked as a maiden aunt and slightly dim. Think of the vicar in “Dad’s Army”. Then of course there’s the Reverend Timms in Postman Pat – all genial smiles and obviously blessed with a single church benefice (it wasn’t set in Lincolnshire), and then a bit later still Geraldine Granger, the vicar of Dibley - in love with Jesus yes, but almost as passionate about chocolate and Hugh Grant. Also essentially lonely and slightly sad.

More recently though we get two quite different representations of clergy on TV. Either they have so little to do that they spend most of their time pursuing criminals and having a string of disastrous relationships, like the succession of clergy in “Grantchester”, or else they seem to live in their churches. You know the scene – somebody wants to find the vicar, so they drop into the local church in the middle of a weekday and there he is – it still nearly always is a he – bumbling about near the altar, wearing a surplice and lighting candles, because what else could we possibly have to do?

Cliches, caricatures, but not real. However, one surprising discovery I made within a few weeks of ordination was that the trope that many clergy like trains was actually true. I met train-spotting clergy, clergy who volunteered on preserved railways, clergy who had incredibly detailed model railways in their lofts. There was a whole alternative world out there, in some case only a few inches tall.

Trains and clergy have something else in common. Images of them are generally outdated or inaccurate. Your average modern train journey, playing unavoidable footsie under the table with the person opposite, and jockeying for position to find space for your laptop on the said table, bears no resemblance to those rather plush individual carriages in period dramas, with rich mahogany woodwork and just enough time to commit murder before the train arrives in the station and the detective - or an off duty vicar – arrives to solve the case.

The thing about cliches though, is that they contain an element of truth, which is why they become so embedded in our consciousness. The peculiar antics of fictional clergy might be no more than entertainment, but they pick up on that sense of being slightly at odds with much of society. We’d like to think it was because of our Christian values, and we hope it is, rather than because we’re just too wet to live in the modern world, but we do sometimes find ourselves in something of a societal waiting room, with nobody quite sure if we’ll bite or faint if they let us out. And the murders in those closed carriages, which would never be possible in these days of safeguarding awareness, reflect the fact that isolation can perpetuate violence and mistrust.

When I considered the gospel passage we’ve just heard, it was the image of those old trains which came to mind. Just recently there was some restored footage shown on social media of a train arriving in a station in the late 19th century, and the carriage doors opening and the platform filling with every possible variety of human beings. Everything from the wealthy, wearing top hats and furs from first class, down to the rough coats, shawls and patched boots of the third class passengers. And the thing which caught my mind was that it was only when they all got out of the train at the end of their journey, leaving their carefully segregated carriages full of people like them, that many of them knew who’d been on the journey with them - but they were all there, just the same.

It seems to me that today we’re celebrating a journey too. In arriving at this milestone, thirty years of women’s priestly ministry, something many people here may have felt they would never see, we celebrate journeys both corporate and personal. The Church as a body and its members as individuals have been on a journey, and the fact that we can celebrate today shouldn’t obscure the reality that those journeys have been costly and painful for many, and continue to be so. Nor should we forget that there are those on this journey with us who still can’t accept women’s ministry. They are on their own journey, discerning as best they can the voice of God, just as those of us who are rejoicing at this milestone today are doing. They're not on a separate train. This train is the journey into God of the whole of the Church. Whether we like it or not, we’re all on board.

Jesus said, “In my Father’s house there are many rooms”. Or possibly railway carriages. Going back to that restored film of all the people getting off the train at the terminus and seeing what mixture of human life spilled onto the platform, I think we have a wonderful picture of this amazing thing we call the Church of England. At the end of this journey, as we all get out of our carriages, filled with people like us, we find on the platform – or in the Kingdom – people who are not like us at all. People who’ve been travelling with us, but we didn’t know it, or we didn’t recognise them, people for whom God also prepared a place and who are welcome at his table. People who also listened for the voice of Jesus, but didn’t hear what we heard. People of faith, just as we are. People for whom Christ died. So actually, people like us after all.

Nor should we think for a moment that this journey is over. I was delighted to accept Bishop Stephen’s invitation to become Dean of Women’s Ministry, and as somebody whose own journey began as a member of Forward in Faith, I take it as yet another example of the divine sense of humour, but in reaching this milestone, it seems to me that we, more than anybody have responsibilities which come with the joy and gift of priesthood. Whilst we know there’s a way to go, and the reception of women’s ministry is still easier in some places than others, huge distances have been covered. Women have become bishops, two of our own archdeacons in this diocese are women and we’re blessed in Lincoln to serve in one of the most inclusive dioceses in the country. And yet we have known, particularly those who were among those early voices raised in favour of women’s ministry, what it is to feel excluded. We have known what it is to speak and be unheard, or dismissed as hysterical, strident, emotional. We have known what it is to be patronised and caricatured, not in the media, but in the Church itself – and yet we’re here, by the grace of God. For that reason today is something wonderful and a cause for joy, but if it’s to be more than just a victory lap it must have consequences.

The journey away from those early caricatures of women who were faithfully trying to follow the call of God into ordained ministry had two vitally important aspects. One of them was words, words spoken with passion and from prayerful conviction, on both sides of the debate, but perhaps even more important, respectful and godly listening. The sort of listening which is open to being changed and hearing something new, possibly something we didn’t really want to hear – the sort of listening which leaves room for the Holy Spirit. It’s the kind of listening which brings about, not only change, but transformation – and, incidentally, the sort of listening we as a diocese need to embrace as we navigate TTCT. The Church of England has been transformed by the ministry of women, not because women are inherently holy, but simply because the lived experience of women has brought an added dimension to the breadth of ordained ministry in the Church and enriched it. And having experienced that enrichment over the past thirty years, we have to ask another question.

What are we going to do with that earlier experience of exclusion? Do we just heave a sigh of relief and enjoy having a place on the inside? It’s tempting until we remember those awkward words of Jesus – he’s good at awkward words - about doing or not doing things for the least of our brothers and sisters being intimately connected with what we do or don’t do for him. Because even as we enjoy this lovely occasion, we who know what exclusion feels like should be asking who else might be feeling that their welcome in the Church and in ministry is grudging or seen as an act of charity. The fight for inclusion doesn’t stop when our little group is safely inside. Having once had to struggle to be heard ourselves should make us wary of any tendency we might have to deafness when other groups challenge ***us*** and our willingness to accept difference. When those who feel marginalised in the Church now try to say how they feel, we could remember the women, some of whom are here today, whose conviction that they were called by God and refusal to deny that calling has eventually brought us to the celebration of 30 years of women’s ordained ministry. When others who feel marginalised speak, let’s not dismiss their words as “strident” or “demanding” and instead try to recognise what makes ***us*** so resistant to hearing ***them,*** if we find we are?

Those words of Jesus again; “In my Fathers house there are many rooms”. The only gatekeeper to the Kingdom of God, is God himself, and he has opened the gate as wide as it would go. If the gate of the Kingdom is open and God’s invitation is for everyone, we the Church, the Body of Christ, should never rest until that unconditional loving welcome is modelled in every aspect of our Church life and ministry. Can we take that mind set to our PCCs, our pulpits, our deanery synods, diocesan synods, General Synod? Can we speak God’s message of inclusive love ***for*** all God’s people ***to*** all God’s people?. Today’s celebration began with women, but by the grace of God, it shouldn’t stop there. Faithful witness, Godly listening, willingness to change and openness to transformation by the Spirit of God. This service is a testament to the fact that we belong to a church which can embrace all those things, a church which recognises every individual as a precious child of God and that none of us are caricatures. Today, by the grace of God, we celebrate as a blessing the ministry of women who once had no voice and whose place in ministry was questioned. It’s been quite a journey. How can what we’ve learned from that journey of discernment and grace equip the Church to allow itself to be even further enriched by those who are travelling with us but still unsure of their welcome? Will we hear their voice? Do we actually know who they are?