

## **Nicki McNelly's first sermon at St.Cuthbert's 9th July 2017**

Words cannot express how thrilled I am to be here and how excited I am about the journey we have ahead of us - and I thank the Vestry and, of course, God for my appointment. I would also like to thank you all for the hours given getting ready for my arrival. The work carried out in the rectory and the preparations for that most amazing service we had on Thursday night; along with the reception following. In case I've forgotten someone – thank you everyone!

Thanks over, if you would indulge me, I would like to spend some time telling you about myself and my journey to this place.

I was born in South Wales and lived with my older brother, mother and maternal grandparents. My parents split up before I was born and I eventually met my father and another two brothers when I was sixteen.

The street where I lived, Bowen's Terrace, Tredegar, had 33 houses and I think brothers and sisters of my grandparents lived in most of them. My mother, being a single mum, worked a lot, so my brother, John, and I would go into any of the houses in that street and get fed and watered. Up to the age of seven my brother and I were sent off each Sunday morning and Tuesday evening to the local Baptist Chapel.

At seven my mother remarried and we moved to Ebbw Vale and lived with my step-father and another older step-brother. Church attendance stopped, but my step-father did drive his mother to the local chapel each Sunday evening and I used to accompany them – although I was never allowed in!

Once a month, something called 'Communion' happened, so, as we had a longer wait for her, we enjoyed some lovely ice-cream from the local Italian café to pass the time.

At 18, I joined the Army and church consisted of church parades, Remembrance, Christmas and Easter services. When it wasn't compulsory, I am afraid peer pressure and sport kept me away.

I married Iain at 22. We were both serving in Cyprus at the time, but that was the end of my army career, as we were not allowed to be posted together. I left the army to follow Iain's career. In the 25 years that followed, my CV became long and varied, interspersed with two beautiful daughters, Anya and Ceri.

Through our married life, although having faith, I didn't attend church. Being in the army, we obviously moved a lot and I didn't find the right place for me, although I had a constant nagging in the back of my mind that I needed to be somewhere.

We were posted back to Cyprus in 2000 and that was the start of big changes in my life. I was baptised in 2001 and did a lot of work with military chaplains and became a member of the Army Archdeaconry Synod. I continued this when we were posted to Northern Ireland in 2004, and while attending a retreat with the Synod in 2006 the Chaplain General asked me why I was being disobedient.

Now when a General asks you why you are being disobedient you worry! I apologised and asked why he thought I was being disobedient. He responded, 'God has been calling you for years and you are not answering'. It was all quite bizarre, as I knew at that time that he wasn't actually a supporter of women in ministry. When I challenged his views, he answered, 'who am I to deny God's call to you'.

Within a year I had visited the Bishop to the Forces in Windsor, attended the Bishop's Advisory Panel in Surrey and began my studies at Cranmer Hall, Durham.

Although as a family we were used to change and transition, this was a huge change in my life and more so, the life of my family, as it was me answering

God's call, not them. However, they have been a huge support to me and I wouldn't be where I am without them.

I was ordained at St. Mary's Cathedral in Edinburgh, where I served my curacy – a huge learning experience, which was followed by my appointment as Provost of St. John's Cathedral, Oban, an even steeper learning curve.

Although I enjoyed my time in Oban, my heart has always been here, and that's not just Edinburgh, but St. Cuthbert's. My ordination stole, which I wore on Thursday evening has the St. Cuthbert's cross on it. For my ordination retreat, I walked St. Cuthbert's Way alone.

While serving my curacy you had a vacancy but I didn't think I was experienced enough to apply. When, too soon afterwards, you had another vacancy, I didn't think it was fair to the good folk of Oban to apply so soon after my arrival there. When this vacancy arose, I knew that I had to apply. Like the nagging in the back of my mind when I didn't attend church, I have had a St. Cuthbert nagging for the last six years – and I don't know why. I just remain faithful to what, I believe, is a call from God to come and serve you in this place.

I hope I am able to serve you well and with the help of God, I should. However, while I believe I am answering a call from God, some of you here may not. After all, we are human and no matter how hard we try, we cannot like and agree with everyone and we will find fault in things that each other do. But I believe God calls us, as we are, warts and all. So, while some of us may find fault in each other, and (hopefully not) not like each other, remember that we are all called to love - and love conquers all.

I would imagine that most of you have either seen oxen or pictures of oxen that are harnessed together by a yoke. They share the burden and work together so that one doesn't have to do all of the work or shoulder the entire burden. Oxen are trained for a specific position in the yoke, so when they are put in the other position, they refuse to move, much like the Pharisees refused to change for Jesus or John the Baptist.

I have already heard from a number of people how great a team we have at St. Cuthbert's and I look forward to being a part of that team, part of that yoke.

As a vestry and congregation, we have exciting times ahead but, at times, the excitement may succumb to stress, anxiety, worry, and we will want to be like the oxen and the Pharisees, refusing to move, refusing to change.

At those times, I ask you that we remember to love, we remember to communicate and we remember to serve God, who calls each of us as we are, and loves us unconditionally.

As we come together to worship today and every week, we admit our hunger for God. God sees our emptiness and feeds us the choicest food, the flesh and blood of the one who invites us today to take his yoke upon us, and learn from him, for he is meek and humble of heart.

How blessed are we.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we ask your blessing on us now as we begin a new chapter in our journey of faith. Be with us every step of the way and give us wisdom to ensure that through love, your will is done in this place and our own pride or desires do not get in the way. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.