

We spend a lot of time in our 21<sup>st</sup> century church comparing ourselves to earlier generations and lamenting how we have fallen away from their greatness. We complain that we don't share the simple joy and togetherness of the earliest churches, like the one described in Acts; that we have lost the passion and beauty of the mystical theologians, the commitment and idealism of the Victorian social reformers, the sheer numbers of the 1950s congregations. We long for the fruit of earlier generations and grumble about how we are a church in decline, barren and unproductive.

But the events we are celebrating this evening give that view of contemporary church reality the lie. Never doubt that the EfM graduates' four years of study has involved joy and fellowship, that they have grown in togetherness as they shared their struggles and triumphs. Never doubt that all those touched by Jude's ministry, whether through the labyrinth, yoga or the Vine, have encountered passion and beauty in his preaching and liturgy, and been called to deeper commitment and idealism through the spirituality they have shared. Ours is not a barren and unproductive church, it is not a dying church, but one that continues to touch and transform lives and bear God's fruit of justice, compassion and love.

There are indeed ways in which we are a very different institution from that of the 1950s and before. We do not bring in the numbers that thronged the pews in the 50s – except just sometimes when we offer a Beyoncé Mass or provide a spiritual space for yoga community. But while I would love to see Grace cathedral and all the churches of our diocese filled to overflowing every week I would not welcome this if it meant returning to an earlier way of belief and being.

Unlike the legislators of the state of Alabama I do not want to turn the clock back to the 1950s and to a patriarchal moral code that controls the bodies of women and declares LGBTQ people deviant. I want to see the church continue to move courageously and vulnerably forward. For this we need lay members who explore theology at depth and have the confidence to validate their own experience of the reality of God. For this we need the delight of a priestly ministry that works at pushing the boundaries of what we understand to be Episcopalian and that refuses to limit the scope of God's love. It is in these ways that God's joy is in us as an institution and that our joy may become complete.

So this evening let us give thanks for all the fruit that shows the church of today is truly a branch of the Vine, overflowing with the love and life of God's very self. Let us celebrate the commitment and fellowship of our EfM graduates. Let us celebrate the passion and creativity of Jude, our newest Canon. They are the leadership the church needs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are the ones who can help ensure we move forward, not backward, rooted in the eternal love of God and bearing the fruit that is needed to feed God's world today.