Faithful God, open our ears to hear your words to us, and enable us to respond with our hearts and lives. Amen.

A member of our church family in Willenhall, is this morning hanging in those moments between life and death. She is an elderly lady, a founder member of our church 60 years ago, who has reached the end of a long, and profoundly special life. When I sat at her bedside in the hospital yesterday afternoon, alongside her family, I was struck with the realisation of how much her life had been lived responding to God’s call, and sharing his love. Here is a woman who knew Jesus, followed him, lived showing her children and her friends his love, and was devoted to the life of the church. Staff at the care home where she has been cared for this past year have remarked, that even in the deep mists of her dementia, the word “church” always brought light into her eyes.

Today is a celebration of women and men like her — women and men who have heard the voice of Jesus speaking, “follow me”, and who have followed. Women and men like Florence Li Tim-Oi, the first woman priest in the whole Anglican Communion, ordained 70 years ago this weekend; Women and men like the 35 women who were priested for the first time here in this Cathedral 20 years ago this year.

Florence Li Tim-Oi was a humble, yet passionate woman. She was not concerned about her status as the ‘First Woman priest’ — but she was dedicated to serving the church in a war-torn country; to pastoring to people in need; to making friends for Jesus and to witnessing to the God given value of every human being, male and female.

Li Tim – Oi’s life and legacy are quite remarkable (do read later, the short biography at the end of our order of service or go online to find out more). Here is a girl born at a time when in many families, girls were not cherished, - and yet, her father named her Tim-Oi, which means “Much beloved”; here is a girl who while still at school, sat through an ordination service at Hong Kong Cathedral and found herself praying “God, would you like to send me too?”; here is a woman who was serving her community so selflessly that her Bishop chose to ordain her priest, when that had never been done before, because he saw in her already, the gift of priesthood; and here is a priest who worshipped, taught, cared and challenged injustice; often in the face of suffering and oppression.

After her death in 1992 (before we even had women priests here in England), a foundation was set up in her memory — to offer help to women who like Li Tim-Oi, lack the funds for their own education, but are called to serve the church and their communities. The foundation has trained, supported and empowered now more than 350 women in countries including Kenya, North India, Rwanda, Brazil and Sudan. Through these women, thousands of lives have been touched in a new way with God’s love. Let me tell you a few of their stories.

• Irene Mondo was supported to train in adult literacy. She lives on the outskirts of Kampala, Uganda, where she set up an adult literacy centre in her own home. The centre is thriving, and now they have built an extension to house the classrooms, library and reading room.
• Alice Wataka is a single priest, who alongside her work is bringing up six children of close family members – all orphaned by death through AIDS.

• Edidah Mary Mujinya is a priest, a mum of 6 and provincial president of the Mothers Union for the church of Uganda. She spoke these words of the help the foundation had given her – “We are forever grateful for the support you ungrudgingly rendered to many of us, women you have not known, who are so far away and of varied cultures. When many of us had lost hope, were helpless, and stuck in a seemingly impossible situation, you came to our rescue. We are challenged. You have given us a sense of belonging, worthiness and a position in society – things that had almost disappeared. You have truly empowered us and we are committed as change agents to empower many others.”

• There is one more wonderful story about this foundation – it is run today, not by descendants of Li Tim-Oi herself – but by the son of Bishop Hall, the man who ordained her. And yesterday at a service in London to mark this 70th Anniversary, the Eucharist was celebrated by the granddaughter of that Bishop. They are proud of the difference that he made in the culture of the church; as they are also committed to celebrating the life of the priest he was led to ordain.

So, what for us? Do we just mark this anniversary and carry on as normal?

No – I don’t think that is what our bible readings are saying to us today – or what the story of Li Tim-Oi is all about. Our readings are a prompt to us – to hear the call of God, the words of Jesus in our lives.

Do you know what it feels like to be out of place; to be in a context which you know isn’t where you are really meant to be?

Let me give you an example – I am a proud Scot, and I am a big football fan. I once watched a Scotland v. England football match in a pub in Cambridge. I think I was probably the only one supporting Scotland in the whole place – the only one who didn’t stand up and cheer when England scored! That did not feel a comfy place to be – it was not the right place for me.

Contrast that with the day I walked into this cathedral for my own ordination – when I walked up this aisle – filled with excitement, fear, a sense of my own inadequacies – and stared into the eyes of Jesus. At that moment, his words “follow me” were all I needed to hear, I know I was in his right place.

Jesus doesn’t just call Peter and Andrew, he doesn’t just call Paul and Florence. Those words are for all of us. They will lead us in different directions. They will take us to unexpected places. But for all of us, he walks with us – male, female, young and old – and it feels so good to be where he wants you.

Amen.