

Sermon at the ordination of deacons

Saturday 28 September, 2024

Given by The Venerable Peter Townley, Ordination Retreat Conductor

First of all, may I say, what a great privilege it is to be able to preach in this Cathedral Church on this very wonderful occasion. Bishop, what an amazing array of talent you have in this Diocese. It's great to see you all. Thank you, to the families, friends, supporters and receiving parishes of those being ordained Deacon today.

All that love, all that prayer, all that waiting, all that watching. You must be very proud.

As we heard a few moments ago, we are all earthen wear vessels, weak, fragile, broken, vulnerable, despite all our bravado. All our many masks.

Deep down, we know that and recognise it in our lives, whatever we are, whatever we do, it's all because of the power of God in Jesus Christ Our Lord working in our lives. We are all reliant upon the grace of God.

There is the story told of the parish priest who was made a bishop, and he broke this news to the congregation at the end of the morning service that there will be an announcement from Downing Street on Tuesday at 10am, that I am be going to become the bishop....

There are certain clergy who have been practicing that line for years.

But after it was announced that he was going to become a bishop, as people were leaving, one old lady asked him if he was excited at becoming a bishop, and he replied, "I haven't got over the excitement of becoming a deacon yet."

I hope that you never get over the excitement of being made a deacon today. I hope that you always remember this day till the end of your days.

The Book of Common Prayer is a very wise book. In the preface to the form and manner of making of deacons, it says, *'When the day appointed by the bishop is come, after morning prayer is ended, there shall be a sermon or exhortation, declaring the duty and office of such as come to be admitted deacons, how necessary that order is in the Church of Christ, and also how the people ought to esteem them in their office.'*

A deacon is a servant - that's what the word Deacon means. And today you are being entrusted with the ministry of Christ, who washed the disciples' feet. The Son of God, who made himself the servant of all.

It's a precarious business being a servant. When you kneel at somebody's feet, you run the risk of being kicked in the teeth.

I've only ever stayed once in a house with servants, it was in Sri Lanka, and what struck me was the deep love and care that the mistress of that house had for her servants, and the deep love and care that the servants had for their mistress.

A servant is keen to learn his or her master's ways, to get on the right wavelength. Read your Bibles, the deposit of faith, the history of our Salvation. Get to know God better and allow that wisdom to form you.

Read widely. Don't be one of these clergy who only read the Church Times. Feed yourself so that you can feed others, and work on your preaching.

People don't need a comedian, they don't need a football commentator, we have enough of those and they're very good.

Tell people about God. Tell them what it is to be a follower of Jesus and never forget people want depth. People want depth.

A servant is a listener. A servant is attentive.

We live overcrowded lives with lots of noise. Give God the chance to speak to you. Say your prayers. Embrace the silence. Don't be afraid of silence.

And listen to your people. Listen to what they're saying, and more importantly, listen to what they're not saying. Visit them in their homes. Get to know their stories.

A servant is discreet, a servant is trustworthy.

Always remember that the people you are called to serve are made in the image of God. Handle them with reverence and with care, and remember to know a little, is to forgive give a lot.

If you can show yourself trustworthy in small things then in time, you will be trusted with bigger things.

Make sure that you learn, and make sure that your training incumbents teach you the basics, because if you don't learn the basics now, you will be a menace later on.

We are the Church of England, we're not a sect, we are the National Church and that is a gift we should never ever, ever take for granted.

Resist the temptation to become just a chaplain to your congregation. Resist the temptation to become an amiable club steward.

There was a great Bishop of Woolwich, John Robinson. Sixty years ago, he wrote a book - *The New Reformation?* And in that book, he talked of the house of God as not the Church but the world.

Get out there. Be salt, be yeast, be light. It says, God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. Not God so loved the church.

St Francis was a deacon. He was never ordained a priest. And it was St Francis who in St Damian's Church in Assisi, had a vision of Christ speaking to him from the cross, '*Francis, rebuild my church. Francis rebuild my church.*' That is the calling of all of us today, to rebuild Christ's Church.

This is a wonderful Cathedral and here we have a wonderful visual aid. I want you for a moment to look at this icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, the mother of Jesus.

With her left arm she's cradling the Christ child. Look at her right hand. She's introducing us to Jesus. Introduce people to Jesus.

Remember, once a deacon, always a deacon. Today is not a passing out parade. It's not the beginning of a probationary year, rather today, is at the heart of all that we are, all that we do. Never mind if you are a priest, bishop, the Pope himself. You are always a deacon.

To quote St Ignatius of Antioch in some words written as he was on his way to be executed in Rome: *'I advise you, be zealous. To do all things in Godly concord with the deacons also, who are most dear to me, having been entrusted with the diaconate of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father before the worlds, and appeared at the end of time.'*

Today you are being entrusted with a great and precious gift.

A great friend of ours was Richard Mason, who in years gone by was the Archdeacon of Tonbridge - some of you might well remember him. When he was dying, I said to him, *"Richard, I will never forget you."* And Richard said to me with those milky and cloudy eyes that he had at the end, *"You know, I will never forget you."*

As you begin this great adventure today, know that you are in so many people's love and prayers.

You are supported, upheld by so many people, their prayers, their love, their concern, not only the church militant here on earth, the church triumphant in heaven - the angels, the archangels, all the company of Heaven, the communion of saints.

God bless you all. Say your prayers. Love the people. Get on with it. Amen