Reaffirmation of Ordination Vows Maundy Thursday April 9 2020 James 5: 13-16; Luke 4: 16-20

First I want to thank you for all you are doing and carrying through these extraordinary times. From conversations Mike and I have had with many of you, and from the glimpses we catch of you online, or the encouraging reports from people across the county, I am aware of the incredible dedication and resourcefulness that everyone of you is using to enable the church to serve the people of Suffolk in these days.

I am aware of the cost personally this has had on many of you – new ways of working are exhausting, but more than that, I imagine for all of us being unable to meet with people in person, having to care for people at a distance, and being unable to use our churches is a huge cost – and we are carrying that together.

So when we come to renewing or reaffirming our vows and promises, our commitment to our calling to public ministry, ordained and lay, what are we doing this year? Because the nature of that ministry is different, even unclear, this year in ways it has not been before. We do not know what shape our world, our country and our county will be in when we eventually emerge from this. When we do emerge, if that is even the right word, we do not know what spiritual and psychological as well as social and economic conditions and reactions there will be among our people from this global trauma.

So in a way that I cannot remember experiencing before, this renewal of vows and promises is first and foremost a recommitment simply to follow, to follow our Lord into the unknown, knowing only that he is with us and before us. It is in a profound way a recommitment to follow him to the cross and to the new life he gives us through that.

We are setting out on a journey where so much of what we have taken for granted will have shifted, where the global economy and so our own local economy will have suffered a blow multiple times greater than that of 2008. The numbers of people plunged into poverty is already alarming.

Or where the collective dismay and grief of lost loved ones whom we have not been able to properly care for in their dying and for whom we have not been able to properly grieve will shape our generation.

Where the pressures of living in close confines is already putting huge strains on domestic life, with susbstantial increase in violence and abuse, as well as increasing mental health challenges.

We do not know what shape and condition our communities and our people will be in. Some will bounce back as if little has happened, but they will still be in a world that has become dramatically different. And navigating a course is not going to be straightforward for all of us.

And something else has been going on, from what I have seen myself and learned from many of you, which is equipping us for this journey. I have been struck by the sense from many of you of a renewed energy despite the challenges in the ministries you are exercising – simple things like rediscovering how useful the telephone is for pastoral calls, and the precious gift of conversations with people with whom for the past little while it has just been hallo and good bye.

Or discovering that all sorts of people in your community who are not church goers are watching your online efforts – because it is you doing it, and they are seeking after something – and maybe in the past the church building has not seemed accessible, or the commitment of crossing the threshold too great.

A number of you have told me about the things you now think you will want to continue. I would just say for myself, streaming morning prayer with around 100 people joining for pretty much the whole service day in day out suggests we might want to continue that too, for whomever that continues to be helpful.

And I am aware of the ways many of you and your congregations are instrumental in the provision of food, of support and care, of telephone contact and follow up for the vulnerable, isolated and those facing increasing hardship in your communities. And all of this work will continue and the demand will increase, as of course, painfully, will funerals.

So I see us in this perhaps discerning a renewed sense of the vocation of the church, and the church for our nation, which I would characterise around prayer and service.

And when we listen to the reading from the Letter of James, from the reading Anna read, we see this fundamental call reflected – a call to prayer and praise, to care of the sick, and to seeking forgiveness of sin. And when we listen to Jesus, in the reading Luke read, we know that ministry is about bringing good news to the poor, release to captives, sight to the blind, freeing the oppressed.

And of course evangelism, sharing good news, is fundamental, but it feels different. Am I overstating it if I say I sense that what we have been seeing in some quarters, a sort of anxious evangelism, driven by anxiety about money and numbers, which people always see through, is subtly being displaced by a more pervasive and persuasive natural evangelism that flows from lives of prayer and active compassion, an evangelism that is motivated by love for others not fear for ourselves.

I know we have hard times ahead, acute challenges particularly over the next two weeks, and then continuing for a good few months ahead. But I ask you now to look out for what you are seeing in the ministries you are exercising – what are the new things that you think we should hold on to, and what, just as importantly, are the things we have discovered we could probably do without.

Make a note of them, so that in a little while we can together start to discern what following Jesus in these new circumstances might look like.

Our renewed vocation as the church and as public ministers is simply and completely this: to follow Christ in every way, and so to the cross, and then to discern the signs of resurrection that are promised us and which are there now and will be there as we emerge from this extraordinary time.

I wish you a blessed Triduum and the joy of Christ’s resurrection.