

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Ordination of Deacons
Saturday 1 July 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sermon by the Reverend Richard Springer

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Good morning.

It is a joy and a privilege to be here this morning.

I stand here at the end of a week of retreat with these women being ordained deacons in the Church this morning and also thinking of the men and women being ordained Priests in this cathedral this afternoon.

We are all here to support the candidates gathered.

Whatever our background and experiences with and within the church. Whatever our interest or ambivalence, religious faith or simply faith in one of these friends and loved ones. We recognise with them that they are responding to the call of God to take on this particular task of caring for and nurturing God's creation, including themselves and one another; a task that we all share in this world.

They are shortly about to be ordained to something that many here would, could or should never do. But they are also doing something that we are all called to do. And that is, to bravely work out a way of being human in our allotted time in this world.

We all have pondered at some point, big fundamental questions of life, meaning and purpose. It starts earlier in life than we probably think - even the tiniest baby recognises its prime purpose, the need to survive - to drink and cry out for loving comfort.

As we grow, the questions become more sophisticated and to wrestle with them is often a lifelong pursuit.

But thankfully not all our paths are the same. God is diversity. And God is both universal and particular. God is a mystery and at the same time very real.

Sometimes we glimpse something significant about our purpose in life, we feel a rightness about a choice we have made - and at other times a wrongness too. Some days we have the words to describe why we do what we do and are who we are, and other days we just have to get on with doing it and being it. God is present to all of this.

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Often the ordinary things of this life contain within them mystery. And the mysterious is best understood in the everyday. Both the ridiculous and the sublime.

Remember the old children's cartoons where a rampaging ghost terrorises the castle residents who turns out to be the disgruntled caretaker in a bedsheet!

It calls to mind the more profound thoughts of Pope Francis, who uses the phrase 'realities are greater than ideas' as one of his most important maxims.

A colleague of mine in London, Fr Angus Ritchie, writes, "that this is why God has always been interested in raising up people to be leaders from and not just for those who are oppressed, those who are ordinary. Think in scripture of Moses and of Esther, or if they are not so familiar to you, of Rosa Parks and Desmond Tutu. People raised up from and not just for. These people and their realities become the driving force in the transformations brought about through their lives. They have been called from and not just for.

Jesus himself once prayed, to affirm this idea, "I praise you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden so many things from the wise and the learned and you have revealed them to little children." This is what God talks about when God talks to himself.

We comfort children that the night is not full of scary monsters and we comfort adults that life is not either. Otherwise it can freeze us like a youngster wide awake in the bed late at night. However, committing to the ordinary task of the everyday can produce the most extraordinary insights and experiences.

That is why the words, prayers and rituals of this special ordination day are celebrated within the context of worship at the Eucharist. The people of God united by the fragments of the body of Christ - His body and ours.

Mystery in the ordinary, beauty in brokenness, treasure in clay jars.

These are not ideas for fridge magnets. St Paul says these things are real so that 'it can be made clear that the extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us'.

God's power is not just high and mighty but is revealed in earthen material. Even these

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women and even you.

Paul knows this because of Jesus.

Jesus is God - dwelling among us - committing himself not only to teaching his ideas in parables and sermons but as we see in John's Gospel, to the reality of bending low, to scrub and wash feet.

He does it even in and because of the tumultuous storm of his life. This event could inspire us to serve when everyone would understand if we didn't.

I think of a Jamaican man I know called Errol. Maybe a little younger than the Windrush generation. Working full time as a painter and decorator trying to make ends meet for his young family. He was made a Pastor in the pentecostal church I grew up in. He had been a deacon. We used to use that title. And he would arrive early to the rented hall, sweep it, put out the chairs, drive off to collect people, come back, set up the sound system and so on. His life in many ways was dedicated to bending low and serving. His service became his life - doing ordinary things was an extraordinary, unforgettable witness.

I encourage us all to ponder these things.

For many of us may know what it is like to do a good turn and also to regret a good-turn. The idea of helping someone out for a few minutes turns into a very real hour and now they're problem means we're late for our appointment or we've got bored.

But, Jesus isn't doing the disciples a good-turn. He's showing them a way of life.

The invitation to each of us is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus's way of life. You don't need robes and a cathedral to do it but it has led some here.

And how will I know, how to follow, I ask?

Priest and poet, Malcolm Guite, writes in responding to our Gospel story:

"And here he shows the full extent of love.
To those whose love is always incomplete.
In vain we search the high heavens above.
But the God of love is kneeling at our feet."

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Not a clever idea but simple Godly reality.

His way of life, asks us to treasure the simple clay jars, including especially ourselves and even my mundanity makes clear the extraordinary mystery of God.

What could be more mundane than feet?

Yet, the feet are a treasure. In His way of life we treasure and wash the feet of others. It is a demand from Jesus himself, "I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

Jesus washes their feet for the treasure is as much our bodies as our plans. He washes their feet knowing all too well that bodies break and plans are cut asunder. He washes their feet so they can see the King stooped low. Preparing them to wear the shoes of the Gospel of peace. He washes their feet because the feet are dirty.

In this week, we have been reflecting on the passages of scripture that tell us of what happened to Jesus in the time just before he was crucified. How he responds to Judas, to a slave who is attacked by a friend, to high powers and political powers, to Simon the man who helps to carry His cross, to the criminal he is hung alongside at calvary.

There is so much we can learn to do. Where we can see what it looks like to follow Him.

It looks like learning to waste time with someone who needs you to. Deciding to disorganise and rebuild those structures that undermine and marginalised others.

Including those structures that you are a part of. It is using your power wisely to encourage those least likely to, to indeed take power themselves. It is being willing to repent and forgive.

When you do, the feet, so often dusty, smelly, battered and hidden, become, as the prophet Isaiah wrote, beautiful. Ordinary and extraordinary.

They can carry an inspiring message that frees us from fear and propels us, prayerfully, toward the particular ways in which we might respond to God in our own lives.

These women are called to treasure the vessels into which has been poured the gifts of grace, the prayers of the faithful and the purposes of God. Not more so than anyone

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else ought to, but nonetheless particularly, artfully and faithfully so.

So that God's light shines in their hearts to 'give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.'

May His extraordinary light shine out of ordinary mundane material not to dispel it but to reveal what beauty has been hidden in the dark.

May the glory and power of God work through us and others just like us, for the sake of the world. Amen.

<https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/tag/betrayal/> -
Malcolm Guite, Maundy Thursday, 2023

<http://www.theology-centre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/People-of-Power-.pdf> -
Angus Ritchie, People of Power, 2019