

The Ordination of Deacons
2 Corinthians 4:1-12
John 13:1-17

St Edmundsbury Cathedral
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29 June, 2024

To the glory of God, Amen.

I hope you will not mind if I begin with a personal word of thanks especially to you, Bishop Martin, to Bishop Mike, and to the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich for the invitation to lead the pre-ordination retreat and to preach today for this wonderful group of deacons; and to Dean Joe Hawes for your warm welcome, and to Canons Charlotte Cook, Philip Banks, Stuart Batten, and Michael Robinson for your extraordinary efforts and great hospitality. I bring you warmest greetings from Dean and President Ian Markham and the faculty, staff, and students of Virginia Theological Seminary who are also excited about the ordinations today.

And special greetings to all of you who are here today to witness this powerful event and to support these ordinands who have prepared so extensively for this day. It is a day of rejoicing for all of us! I also want to give a shout out to Saint Peter and to Saint Paul, the saints (and martyrs) whom the Church honors this day. Even though I'm not preaching on Peter and Paul exactly — we do read part of a letter from Paul and Peter certainly appears in the Gospel — it will be special for these deacons to remember every year, on June 29th, that they were ordained on this day and, like Peter, to confess that Jesus is God's Messiah, and, like Paul, to proclaim Jesus Christ and not themselves. Jesus Christ came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many so that we might live in him. It is a great day on which to be ordained!

It is also a great day for all of us, and for the Church as a whole, especially our part of it, the Anglican Communion of Churches throughout the world. What a gift for all of us to be present here today. We can already sense the power of God the Holy Spirit working through the Church's tradition (the sacred words we hear and speak, the music we hear and sing). We can also sense that God is doing a new thing, something so new that we don't even know what it is yet. We don't know what will happen as a result of what God is about to do here today.

For the past few days, these deacons have been thinking and praying a lot about what it means to be a deacon, especially at this moment in history, about the calling and work of a deacon, and about what all of that means to each of them personally. I can tell you that they are amazing and wonderful, both talented and hard-working: just the sort of people that the Church needs today for some of its most important work. It has truly been a privilege to get to know them, at least a little bit, and to be a small part of their *final* preparation. Of course, their preparation beforehand has been considerably more extensive than the few days we spent together.

The biblical lessons for today have been chosen to help us to reflect on the particular vocation and work of deacons. As we have already heard, all members of the Church are united with Jesus Christ in Baptism and are called to serve him as disciples, as ambassadors, and as witnesses to God's love for all people, shown in his saving work. Then why does the Church need deacons?

First of all, to remind us of this vocation of service. Every time we see a deacon in action, we are reminded of God's love and concern for the world and everyone in it.

Secondly, because there is a variety of gifts that God's Holy Spirit pours out upon the Church: there are some people who are especially gifted for loving service to others. Deacons show us what God's love looks like and they teach us how to do it better. It isn't easy being a deacon, which is why we will be praying for them and supporting them in their work, which is their calling, their vocation, their response to God's invitation to interpret the needs of the world to the Church, and to interpret the good news that the Church knows to the world, especially to those who most need to hear it.

The Reformation theologians spoke of a four-fold call to ministry in the Church. The first is the *general call*. This is the vocation or calling of all Christians to follow Jesus Christ, to pattern their lives in a cruciform shape of discipleship and to show forth the power of the resurrection in their lives. All of the baptized are ministers of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. The second is the *inner call*, sometimes also named the *secret call*. This is an inner persuasion, a prompting, something like a voice in your head, that says you are meant to follow Christ in some specific, particular way. People who experience this sometimes go on a pilgrimage or volunteer for missionary work or apply to join a religious order like the Franciscans or Benedictines, or they take on some other kind of work as a devotion to God, like becoming a deacon.

At this point, a question usually arises about the third call, the *providential call*. Such a person, usually with the help of others, discerns whether they have the necessary gifts, talents, skills and life circumstances to take on such a special ministry. For example, if I want to be a pilot, a friend would remind me that I have a deathly fear of heights, so not a pilot, not a trapeze artist, not a mountain climber. A person who faints at the sight of blood is probably not called to be a surgeon. Finally, there is the *ecclesiastical call*. This is the recognition of a vocation and the invitation of the Church to engage in that special form of ministry within the Church. A call has to be tested in community. It has to be based in reality. A person who loves God and just can't stand working with other people is probably not called to church work.

What does this fourfold call look like for our deacons today? They are all rooted in communities of baptized Christians who seek to follow Jesus Christ in their lives, the *general call* to be a disciple of Christ. Each of them has also had some inner experience that led them to believe that God might be calling them to become a deacon. They spoke about it and that began a process of discernment to see if others agreed that their gifts, talents, inclinations, actions looked like they had been prepared for this ministry by God's providential leading, the *providential call*. Then they entered a long process of training, education, more discernment, before experienced and wise Church leaders were ready to extend an *ecclesiastical call*, and here they are today.

Paul describes the diaconal vocation well in his second letter to the Corinthians. Paul and his co-workers persist in their ministry of preaching God's word faithfully and truthfully. They are not promoting themselves; they are proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and describing themselves as servants or slaves for the sake of Jesus. That doesn't mean they are masochistic or that they enjoy suffering. The Greek word for deacon (*diakonos*) does not mean "doormat." They are clear that they are working for God, empowered by God's mercy in an unusual way. Paul speaks of their "extraordinary power." The important thing is that they know where the power comes from: it comes from *God*; they are just the *containers* that hold God's extraordinary power to overcome adversity and persecution. They are struck down, but they are not destroyed.

Paul doesn't say "We have this treasure in Ming vases so that we may be greatly admired and impress all of you." No. He says, "We have this treasure in clay jars, pots, like flower pots. What you should be looking at is the beautiful flower, not the pot." Paul and his co-workers point to *God*, to God in *Jesus Christ*, to the *Holy Spirit* of God that keeps them going when they should be done for, this "extraordinary power" that allows them to testify both to the cross and the resurrection. They always seem to be inches away from death; in fact they are very much alive.

This same paradoxical theology shows up in the Gospel of John as well, in the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. The opening of the story makes it clear that it is *because* Jesus knows who he is and whose he is that he is free to choose to do the work that a household slave would have done in that culture.

Jesus knows that he has come from God and that he is going to God. He knows that his hour has come to depart from the world and return to the Father. He knows that the Father has given all things into his hands. He also knows that Judas Iscariot, one of his twelve chosen disciples, is just about to betray him to the authorities, which will lead to his death. We are told that, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

The disciples must have been astounded when he got up from the table, stripped for menial work, wearing the towel that would dry their feet, took a basin full of water and began to wash their feet and wipe them dry with the towel. Peter speaks for all of them, '*You will never wash my feet!* But when Jesus explains that it's about being in relationship with him, Peter caves, and Jesus washes the feet of all of them — *all of them*, including Judas.

Jesus put on his robe again, returned to the table and asked, "Do you know what happened here? Do you get it? You rightly call me your Teacher and your Lord, because that is who I am. So since I have washed your feet, by way of example, you also ought to wash one another's feet, as I have done to you. Servants are not greater than their master, nor messengers greater than the one who sent them. Since you know this, you are blessed if you do it."

Our deacons *do* understand this and they will both be blessed themselves and become a blessing to others, as they model Christ's love in servant leadership, caring alike for rich and poor, those with power and those who are powerless, the respectable and those that people don't look at. They will remind us that *all of us* are called to serve others in the name of Jesus Christ. So let's give thanks to God for every one of them and for all of them together. And let's join our voices in song with Charles Wesley's invocation of the Holy Spirit. Then, the ordination proper begins. Let's do this thing!