

Sermon Preached by The Bishop of St Germans,
The Rt Revd Royden Screech
On the occasion of the Ordination of Deacons
Saturday 27th June 2009

It must be well over 20 years ago now, but I have never forgotten it. I was vicar of a very large housing estate near Croydon. I had gone to visit a woman, recently bereaved to make arrangements for her husband's funeral. Over a cup of tea she was telling me how good it was to have her family around her. "My 8 year-old grandson was the best", she said. "Yesterday he really made me laugh. I was sitting in here on my own having a little cry when he came through the door and saw me. 'Why are you crying Nanny? I suppose it's because Grandad has died and you are very sad, isn't it Nanny?'"

"That's right", she said.

"Still," said the boy, "if Grandad's died and gone to heaven, I suppose we should be happy really."

"Yes", she said, brightening.

"Mind you", said the boy after a long pause, "Whichever way you look at it, Grandad's a goner!"

Now, I'm not recommending that as a pastoral style to our new deacons, but apart from making Nanny laugh, which in itself was no bad thing, the little boy had recognised a profound truth. However strong a person's faith is, whatever we believe, our faith does not protect us from the realities of life. It's not a kind of insurance policy which means that bad things won't happen to us and it won't remove from us the pain of bereavement say, or the heartbreak of marital breakdown or divorce, or the pain of enduring severe illness, our own, or that of someone we love. Faith will help us cope. It will help us to make sense of what happens around us, it provides a context for us in which to live our lives and express the ultimate hope that those lives are unique and precious to God.

We (that is those to be ordained deacon this morning and those to be ordained priest in their parish churches during the coming week and I) have been in retreat since Wednesday afternoon. We have worshipped together and said our prayers, we have been still together and made time for God. Through addresses, prayer and worship and Bible study we have been thinking about the way in which their faith will be expressed in their new ministries as deacons in their parishes, communities and places of work. We have, naturally I think, had one eye on today. We have looked at the things shortly to be said and done, the promises and declarations soon to be made and we have realised that today would be a big occasion, a bit of a do, and so it should be.

I remember the first time I preached at an ordination, 10 years ago in Guildford Cathedral. I had been looking for a biblical event with which to compare the ordination but not doing very well until a couple of weeks before, on holiday, I found myself in a monastery in Russia, standing in front of an icon of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on what we now remember as the first Palm Sunday. As I stood looking at it I thought "That's it. That fits!" You may recall that Jesus entered Jerusalem, the Holy City, in a highly stylised way, riding an ass, fulfilling an Old

Testament prophecy of the way in which the Messiah would come. It turned into a kind of party. People carpeted the road with their cloaks and others cut palm branches from the trees. Matthew's gospel continues:

"Then the crowd that went ahead and the others that came behind raised the shout "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessings on him who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the heavens!" They lined the streets and cheered."

That party, that triumphal entry led, of course, to suffering and death. Five days later Jesus was on the cross.

It is right that today should be a day of celebration, a cause for a special service, a reason for a party, as today we share in the ordination of new deacons for the Church of God and to give thanks that similar services are happening in cathedrals and churches up and down the country. But it is important to remember what we are celebrating. These new deacons have been chosen for a ministry of service, a ministry which is itself cross-shaped. "A deacon is called to serve the Church of God." The Bishop will say in a few moments and we have just heard our Lord's words in the gospel "among you whoever wants to be great must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the willing slave of all."

So, in our retreat we have been looking at words like servant, discipline, authority, obedience, words which often sound at odds with the spirit of the age.

The deacon – an ordained representative of the church stands in a special position in the church and community because they bear the name servant – it's what deacon means. They remind all of us, bishops, priests, lay men and women that the primary vocation, calling, of all of us who seek to be Christians is to be a servant of Christ and of one another.

For nearly seven years I used to work for the Ministry Division of the Church of England, testing vocations at Selection Conferences up and down the country. It was about seeking to discern whether God was calling individuals to ordained ministry, a specific representative role in the church and community, or to lay ministry, the primary vocation to apply my Christian life, faith and principles to my world of work and community. But, of course, before discernment can be made, the voice of God has to be heard and responded to.

We heard as our first reading this morning the call of the Prophet Isaiah, "And I heard the voice of the Lord saying 'Whom shall I send and who will go for us' Then I said 'Here I am, send me'."

I hope that this ordination this morning will remind all of us who are Christians that our shared vocation is to service, and might make us more aware of the voice that calls "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us." For some there may be a call to offer for ordained ministry in that voice. For others it may be a call to allow the gifts given you at your baptism to be stirred up for ministry at work, or in your parish or community. I know there are many here who are here as personal friends, or family, or colleagues of these new deacons who would not call themselves Christians, but who are here to support, to celebrate, to be with. And I know how much your support and encouragement is appreciated. For you there may be a voice calling to

consider the claims of Christianity and a call to discipleship for the first time, or a return to faith.

As I said at the beginning, our faith is not an escape from the realities of life. Rather it is an expression of our desire to live our God-given lives in God's way. As deacons these men and women will be privileged to be with people at the high points and low points of their lives, and everything between. In making Christ known to all, they will seek to be Christ the servant, Christ the deacon, to those among whom they minister.

“among you whoever wants to be great must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the willing slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give up his life as a ransom for many.”

God's ministry with you begins a new phase as you are ordained deacons. Enjoy the party. Enjoy this triumphal entry into the diaconate. But remember too that within five days or thereabouts you may be at someone's cross, even your own. Your ministry is cross-shaped, outstretched in service.

Yet through the cross we affirm comes new life, true life, real life. So may God bless you as you are ordained, and may this service inspire all of us today to listen out for, and respond to, the promptings of the voice that says “Whom shall I send?”

AMEN