

***Sermon preached by Canon Dr Rod Garner
(Diocesan Theological Consultant, Diocese of Liverpool)
at the Ordination of Deacons at Truro Cathedral
on Saturday 3 July 2010 10.30am***

It's a delight and privilege to be here in this beautiful building on such a special occasion. The smiling faces of the ordinands on the front row are here to support me, the sun is shining and I've just been inspired by the wonderful singing of the choir before ascending the pulpit.

I have a confession to make: as the Americans say, I feel a little conflicted. Since arriving last Tuesday I've been given different advice once people realised that I was to preach this morning. Some have said 'speak slowly, carefully and deliberately or they won't hear you.' Others have remarked 'speak quickly, ten minutes. World Cup after service!' What's the preacher to do? I guess that he has to get straight to the point.

First then, greetings from the Diocese of Liverpool where I work as priest and theologian and from Bishop James. Secondly, thanks to Bishop Roy for his original invitation, to Canon Julia for organising the retreat so carefully and for being a good colleague and, of course, to the candidates. Charlie, Suzanne, Jane, Roger, Elaine, Steven, Dominic and Di all proved very attentive listeners to my addresses. In fact they appeared to be listening so intently that at times their eyes were closed as if they were asleep!

Looking down the list of parishes where the ordinands are to serve, I'm reminded of just how many saints you have in Cornwall – twenty will be mentioned this morning and during tomorrow's service. Liverpool is a bit thin by comparison. We have only two home grown saints and one is regarded as a bit dodgy because of his defection. I'm referring to St Stevie Gerrard and St Wayne Rooney. They need your prayers right now as they languish in that fiery football furnace where there is weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth and a great multitude that no man can number all crying 'We want our money back!' Please pray for them!

And that's my first point for the deacons, even a text for their ministries – 'develop a sense of humour and live on your knees.' Humour puts everything in perspective. I've shared a lot of deep things with them over the past three days but we've also laughed. And yes, of course I was having you all on about Liverpool saints. They are not scarce; we have thousands of them in the Diocese, just like Truro. They are called congregations, much smaller than today but no less vital. Let's call them 'little platoons' – faithful, local, committed, doing love's work and called to be saints. An ordination service is for candidates but it's also a celebration for congregations. A Church needs its deacons but without the laity there is no Church to speak of at all. Today particularly, we are reminded that we are one body in Christ, members one with another, all for all, sharing a common life and purpose.

So deacons are with us and for us, co-workers and servants, embodying in their life and the 'minute particulars' of their ministries the moral character that encourages and inspires; the goodness that is infectious and the love that claims souls for Christ by its sheer attractiveness. Do we have a name for this – the qualities that St Paul elaborates so carefully in his epistle – the compassion, generosity, cheerfulness, self-control and service that epitomise for him the hallmarks of discipleship? Let's call it virtue – the higher standard, the proper life that points others to the One that Martin Luther called 'the proper man', Jesus Christ. Each year I spend time in America teaching and preaching.

An academic colleague over there has recently written a book entitled *Do Morals Matter?* He has dedicated the book to his son and the opening inscription reads: 'To Luke, that you may above all things be virtuous.' I've spent time with Luke so I was quite taken by the sentiment. It's a big ask for flawed human beings like us but not impossible. For generations before Christ, for Jews and Greeks alike, the getting of virtue was the only show in town, the best end and ultimately the vindication of a profitable life, preferred by far to money, success, fame and ambition.

So deacons are beacons, sources of light and illumination. They are also stretcher bearers carrying the casualties – the ones not caught by the State safety net, the nobodies and nuisances that Jesus came to serve and save as a sign of the kingdom, those who can't get on their bikes and long to be recognised and affirmed but are so easily forgotten.

My notes tell me to pause at this point.... I think we all know that there is a storm coming in this country, possibly even a Great Disruption. When I read the former Tory politician Michael Portillo, predicting the day after the Budget that there will be battalions of the vulnerable in Britain, my theological antennae begin to tremble. I am back to the beginning of my ministry thirty years ago. I can hear the sounds of the riots in Liverpool and the eerie silence afterwards. I can recall with painful acuity the aggravated social divisions and register with pride the response of a national Church that had to speak out and take sides in order to defend the poor.

Into such a world we are sending these deacons. The end of this service, in common with all Eucharistic worship, reminds us powerfully that while it is good to belong and be at home in the Church, the Christian must 'go in peace to love and serve the Lord.' Deacons go in response to the perennial question 'Whom shall I send?' I hope they shuddered a little inside as they heard the reading from Isaiah and glimpsed from afar the prophet faltering in the presence of the Most High but finally ready to say 'Here am I, send me.' The book of Isaiah has been described by some theologians as the Fifth Gospel and perhaps never more so than here as we hear the summons and the affirmation: 'Yes, I'll go, send me.'

Local communities are going to need much of what is on offer here today – little platoons holding the fort, keeping civil society human and decent, fixing the holes and supplying the glue without which things fall apart. They are going to need parish servants and leaders

repairing the fabric of the world bit by bit, stone by stone, asking only for the chance to serve and demanding that the vulnerable must not be overlooked. It's an awesome and privileged task that embraces struggle, cost, duty and joy and not everyone has the vocation or desire. No wonder that St Paul can ask 'Who is sufficient for these things?' I have another text for the deacons: it's John 6.66 and despite its resonance with the book of Revelation I find it more terrifying than the Number of the Beast. 'And there were many disciples who no longer walked with Jesus.' Even from the beginning we have on record the fact that the mercy, pity, peace and love embodied in Jesus were not enough for some to take the risk of following.

It is not so here this morning, not with 'Charlie's angels' – the special ones assembled before us. They go in trust and obedience; they have felt the presence of the Holy One of Israel in their life and they will stand with you and serve. They have said 'Yes, send me. Yes, I will go, even when I fail and fall and fail again.' They go like Abraham and Moses, Isaiah and Paul, Andrew, Peter, James and John, like all who have confessed themselves strangers and pilgrims in this world but are known and loved by God, because they bear on their bodies the wounded hands of Christ. They go as deacons: the ones who say YES.

Amen.