

Ordination Sermon 2017

Acts 1:14-17; 20-26; Psalm 84; Philippians 3:13-21; John 15:9-17

1. Introduction

- *BCP Rubric*

Contrary to what you might think bishops are always being told what to do. Everyone is an expert in what needs to be done in church leadership, and many are very forthcoming in their advice about what needs to happen to care for or renew the church. Even a sermon at an ordination comes with precise instructions from our forebears with added constitutional imprimatur. The Book of Common Prayer remains our Church's standard of worship and doctrine and it prescribes a sermon or exhortation on this occasion *declaring the duty and office of such as come to be admitted Deacons; how necessary that order is in the Church of Christ; and also how the people ought to esteem them in their office*. So I am actually not free to say whatever I like to these seven candidates and to this large congregation present on this significant occasion but have taken to heart that part of the rubric about what they may need to focus on in order to be esteemed in their new office.

- *St Matthias' Day*

Since this service is also being held on St Matthias' Day we recall how Matthias was selected by God to replace Judas after those gathered together on that occasion prayed *'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen'*. While the duties of deacons will be spelt out in the liturgy and especially in the Bishop's exhortation, I want to focus on what today's set readings stress about what must be in your hearts as you are admitted to this office. Being a deacon is not just about what you do, but is actually about who you are. It is about your being not just your doing. It is essentially

about your wholehearted commitment to knowing Christ and loving like Christ.

2. Be An Example In Knowing Christ

In the first place I encourage you to meditate on and take to heart some words of Paul in the New Testament reading. He wrote -

Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

The critical question is to what is the apostle referring? What is the *it* he has not yet made his own? Our reading comes in the context of a sustained piece of writing about his past, present and future. As to the past he no longer relies on his past human achievements to be right with God. As to the present he really wants to know Christ more fully. As to the future he is single-mindedly determined to keep pursuing this goal which is ultimately fellowship with Christ in all its fullness. What then does knowing Christ more fully mean?

There are some essential first steps as you have no doubt already experienced. We get to know Christ as we spend time in his company, listening to him speak in the Scriptures, talking to him in prayer, accepting his invitations, trusting his promises and making his concerns ours in our daily living.

However the whole context suggests we will only know him more fully by living a cross shaped life, by daily denying self and following Jesus and in particular by being willing to suffer with him (verse 10). Not of course just any sufferings (those which come from being a human in a broken and fallen world), but those afflictions which come from being openly and publicly identified as Christ's person, and in your case as his ambassadors. In particular, it is the suffering which comes from sharing the gospel with an unbelieving world. It is the suffering which

comes from seeking to save those for whom Christ died. It is the misunderstanding, the insults, the ridicule and the ostracism we experience when we seek to make Christ known in a suspicious and sometimes antagonistic environment.

Paul's whole purpose in life is then illustrated by a sustained imagery of running. Of course, everything in Paul's life is focused on a future in which Christ is finally and fully known. But so strongly does he feel this divine pull to know Christ fully that twice he says that he runs full tilt, straining every muscle towards it. He uses two obvious pictures from athletics at the games -

In the first place, the runner's eyes are fixed on the goal and not *what lies behind*. Unless you are Usain Bolt you never look back! Perhaps you know the story of the first time two men ran a sub four minute mile in Vancouver in 1954. John

Landy from Australia led all the way but mistakenly looked over his shoulder as he came to the final bend to see where Roger Bannister from England was, only to be passed on the other side and find himself beaten to the tape.

In the second place, the runner strains towards *what lies ahead*, running down the home stretch, leaning forward, extending themselves to break the tape and in the recent Olympics to even dive over the line.

This picture Paul uses depicts a single-minded, determined perseverance to deliberately and persistently forget and then leave behind anything that might impede his running (especially any reliance on his heritage or so called human achievements). Instead there is a committed resolve to press on relentlessly to secure the *prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus*. This prize is no laurel wreath which fades or deteriorates with time or a metal medal which can be dropped and broken or stolen, but the crown of life which is Christ himself. The greatest reward is to know Christ fully and be in perfect fellowship with him.

Sisters and brothers in the midst of all your 'doing' in your ministry placements, the fundamental call on your life as a deacon remains to be an example to all of us of what it means to follow Christ and know him. May you all in the power of the Spirit be completely focused on knowing Christ fully so that we can all emulate your example.

3. Be An Example In Loving Like Christ

In the second place, I encourage you to meditate on and take to heart the words of Jesus in the gospel reading when he said –

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.....This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

In the upper room on the night of his betrayal Jesus makes it plain that sacrificial love (even being willing to lay down our lives for our friends) is to be the distinguishing feature of both the Christian disciple and community. We all need this *new commandment* to love others as he has loved us for at least three reasons -

In the first place, left to ourselves we will often only love those with whom we have something in common or those to whom we are drawn naturally. We will love narrowly. This is a normal human phenomenon. For example, as a country

there will always be a temptation to put up the drawbridge and protect ourselves, to look after our own citizens and let the rest of the world fend for itself. The ready agreement of both sides of politics to treat asylum seekers harshly is a classic example of self-interest.

We all therefore need to be commanded to love or we will constantly make selfish choices to not put someone else's best interests first. Even those

ordained as deacons need this command because we are sinful and not yet fully redeemed.

In the second place, we need this command because as Jesus says this is about a certain quality of loving. We are meant to love others with God's love. Think about it for a moment. God has never lived in solitary exclusion. He is Trinitarian with an eternal relationship of love between Father, Son and Spirit. Notice therefore that Jesus said he loves us with the same love which he received from the Father, with the clear implication that we are to pass this love on to others. In short, God loved Jesus, Jesus loved us and we are to love one another with God's love.

In the third place, we need his command because ultimately love is the fruit that lasts (verse 16). Many things we do will make no lasting impact, but love has eternal effects. In the metaphor of the vine and the branches Jesus has just talked about his disciples bearing fruit to show the world they belong to him (8). In the end it is our love for one another which must be our distinctive mark in the here and now. We are not just to be known for our fine words but rather for our good works.

While loving sacrificial service imitating Jesus is a call on the lives of all his disciples, there is a real sense in which it remains the essence of ordained diaconal ministry. Although the inherited understanding of the deacon as one who waits on tables is currently and rightly being challenged and expanded, *servant* remains the core meaning of the Greek term. It is so apt because deacons in this Diocese to name but a few examples are renowned for their loving service to the sick, the aged, the young, the disabled, the marginalised, the poor, the lonely and the imprisoned. In fact deacons are the real pioneers in sharing the love of God with those who are not usually or formally connected with our churches. As Bishop Steven Croft

has put it –

The [diaconal] calling is deeper and richer than the calling to be an evangelist: the call to live and proclaim the gospel in a variety of different contexts. This is a calling to serve, through [loving] service to form community, in community to sow the gospel and gather a new congregation.

So my dear friends if we are to reach all people with the love of God in Jesus, we need you to constantly set us an inspiring example of loving like Christ in deed and word. May you all in the power of the Spirit so experience the love of Jesus in your hearts that it flows out in blessing to all you meet.

4. Conclusion

In a few moments Susan, Anna, Peter, Tim, John, Tim and Liz will stand before the Bishop to be examined. They will make their solemn ordination vows. We the congregation will accept them as Deacons in the Church of God and promise to support them. It is our prayer today that God will give you strength to set us an example in knowing Christ and loving like Christ for his glory.

+ Trevor Edwards
25th February 2017