29 June 2019: 10am Ordinations

Peter and Paul, Apostles


The Venerable Martin Gorick, The Archdeacon of Oxford

This is a giant day! It’s a privilege to share it with you. Thank you to Bishop Steven for asking me to preach. Thank you to the families, friends and others who have come to support these people at their ordination today and will support them as they go on. Your love and care are crucial to them, and I thank you for it. When I was first ordained and agonised over writing sermons, my wife brought me down to earth. ‘People won’t worry too much what you say Martin, as long as you keep it short!’ She’s not here today, so I’ll carry on…

And say thank you to these ordinands, these people who have allowed the call of God to echo in their hearts. Who may have given up a lot to be here. Who have dared to share that sense of call to others and have it tested. In the world’s eyes you are all trainee vicars. But you know that today, in a few moments time you will be ordained Deacon. What does that mean?

Let’s look to our readings:

Isaiah 6 ‘In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord.’ Uzziah had been king of Judah for 52 years. It was the end of an era, a time of change and national confusion. A little like England today? Who knows. But God calls Isaiah to minister into that context, and he calls you to do the same, to preach with the news in one hand and the scriptures in the other. And that vision Isaiah ‘saw the Lord.’ He was given a picture of the earth ‘filled with God’s glory.’ How amazing that would be! All creation free at last, free to live, all of us free to be who we were meant to be. To have life, as Jesus would say, and have it to the full!

But the world is far from glorious, and so are we most of the time. Isaiah doesn’t say ‘Yippee!’ he says ‘Woe is me!’ For I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips.’ He was daunted by the calling, and so should you be. It’s going to be tough for you, as it was for Isaiah. As it has been for every true minister in every time and
place. You may feel you’re not good enough, just as Isaiah did. But God hasn’t called
some perfect person to be his minister…he has called you. You may feel the task is
beyond you…because it is. But that means you will make room for God, and your
ministry will only be blessed if you allow the living God to work through you. It’s his
mission, not ours.

In Isaiah’s vision, cleansing and forgiveness come from the altar. As you receive the bread
and wine today receive that same strength, feel it flowing through you to bring healing
and forgiveness to others.

In the face of the world’s brokenness, God calls ‘Whom shall I send, who will go for us?’
And you know the answer. ‘Here am I; send me!’

Our second reading from Acts is a special one for today. It’s about the calling of the first
Deacons. And you are being ordained Deacon today, following in their footsteps.

The church had been growing so fast that they had a problem. People weren’t getting
looked after. The apostles were preaching a gospel of love and equality before God, but
some ethnic groups seemed to do better than others. They preached love and care for all,
but couldn’t care for the numbers that were coming; widows and orphans were being
missed out. So they selected seven good people, full of the Spirit and wisdom, to be
ordained as Deacons, which means servants. To be servants of the servants of God. To
ensure that the church delivered on the ground what it preached from the pulpit.

I’ll say that again because it’s the special calling of Deacons and indeed of Archdeacons:
‘to see the church delivers on the ground what it preaches from the pulpit.’

It’s no good saying we are the church for all and ignoring the annoying person in the
corner. It’s no good saying we value children if we ignore safeguarding and pastoral
guidelines. It’s no good saying we’re open to all if our churches are locked. As Deacons
you follow in the line of these holy seven including the first martyr Stephen. A man full
of the Holy Spirit who said ‘Father forgive’ as the mob stoned him to death. Stephen
whose testimony and holy death would inspire St Paul and opened the way for Jesus to
come into his life. Stephen the true Deacon who delivered on that stony ground of
martyrdom what was being preached in those early pulpits. You too will be ordained
Deacon today. What footsteps to walk in! Next year, God willing, you will be ordained
priest. But you never stop being a Deacon as well. Once a Deacon always a Deacon. This
holy ordination lasts a lifetime.
And finally our gospel reading. The disciples James and John sidling up to Jesus, asking if they can have the chief seats in the Kingdom of God. No wonder Peter and the others were angry when they found out. Going behind their backs, currying favour with the boss. Trying to climb the greasy pole of ministry.

It comes in subtle ways even today. How big is your church? Are you assistant- or incumbent-focused? Have you been set aside as a potential theological educator? We have endless ways of making ourselves feel puffed with pride or riddled with anxiety. Jesus said to James and John, ‘You don’t know what you are asking.’ You’re missing the whole point.

(As the card in your service booklet says,) ‘the first rule of shepherding is that it’s not about you. It’s about the sheep and the land.’ It’s about walking with Jesus, the Good Shepherd and pointing people towards him. Today is not about your ministry at all. It’s about God’s ministry through you. And we hear again that it’s going to be tough as well as glorious. Jesus said to James and John, ‘Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?’ ‘Can you give your lives as I will give mine?’ They wanted positions of power but Jesus said, ‘Live my life, with me in you and you in me, and that will be enough.’

So don’t be an Instagram Curate, everything shiny on the outside, while inside lies doubt, fear and anxiety. Be and remain what you are, a human being who follows Jesus. Stay true to yourself, and to those closest to you. And may you as a Deacon be a true servant of the servants of God. And may you be refreshed and blessed daily by our Lord Jesus Christ as you bring many to him. For he is not just our true high priest, but the humblest Deacon too, ‘who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.’

Amen.