29 June 2019: Ordinations
Peter and Paul, Apostles
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‘You do not know what you are asking.’ Words from our Gospel reading, St Mark, 10th chapter, 38th verse. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

There was once a student at an Ivy League university who was doing really, really well. But just before her final year she had an encounter with an Eastern mystic. The mystic said to her, ‘Can’t you see you’re polluting your soul with this success-orientated way of living. Your idea of happiness is to work day and night to be the best. What you need is a radical change of lifestyle.’ The mystic invited the student to leave university, to move abroad and to live in his commune. Much to her parents’ dismay, that’s exactly what the young woman did. Six months later they received this letter: ‘Dear Mum and Dad, I know you’re upset about my decision, but I wanted to tell you how much it’s changed my life. For the first time I feel at peace. Out here there’s no competing or climbing over anyone else. In fact, this way of life is so in harmony with my inner self that in six months I’m already the number two disciple in the commune, and I reckon I can get number one by June.’

That student adopted a radically new way of life. Overnight her circumstances were very different; but it was going to take a lot longer for her so-called ‘inner self’ to catch up. Old habits die hard.

For those of you sitting down here at the front this afternoon, your way of life is about to change big-time. You have been called to become leaders of God’s people, and I trust that by this stage you can recite Jesus’ words in your sleep: ‘whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be the slave of all.’ I don’t need to tell you that the word ‘deacon’ means ‘servant’; it goes without saying that leadership in the Church should look very different from leadership in the world. You know all this, and yet your ‘inner self’ will take time to catch up.
The mentality of servanthood doesn’t come with same-day delivery, or even next-day. We may leave the cathedral with collars around our necks but the halo around our head will take longer to materialise: at a conservative estimate, I reckon at least a lifetime. In the Church, no less than in society, people instinctively seek success and recognition. When a friend of mine was considering Christian ministry his parents took the view that every cloud has a silver lining: ‘That’s a pity,’ they said, ‘at least, starting young, you’ve got a good chance of becoming a bishop.’ All of us need to resist the tendency to focus on ‘my ministry’, secretly hoping to be noticed. So it’s worth asking the question: what will help us not only to look like a deacon but to think like a deacon as well?

James and John were two ordinary guys who dropped everything to begin a radical new way of life: they became disciples of Jesus Christ. But no matter how much Jesus talked about humility and service, James and John were ambitious for power and greatness. In our Gospel reading they seize an opportunity to ask for top jobs in the Kingdom of God: ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you…. Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’ When King Jesus gains the throne, they want to be his deputies.

Instead of dressing them down, Jesus reasons with them gently. And from Jesus we can get three tips to help us to think like deacons: learn about service, live out service, and look at service.

First of all, we need to learn about service. Jesus tells James and John ‘You do not know what you are asking.’ In spite of all his predictions that he is going to die a violent death, the disciples have only heard what they want to hear; so he asks them: ‘Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?’

The cup someone drinks symbolises their destiny; in the Old Testament it was usually a cup of suffering. Baptism is often a symbol of being swamped and overwhelmed with sorrow. Jesus explains yet again what Christian service will really mean, and we need to hear it again and again. It’s all too easy to forget what Jesus has said about his mission and to substitute in something we like better. Deacons must diligently study the Scriptures to learn what Christian service means.

Secondly, we need to live out service. James and John boldly declare their readiness to suffer with Jesus, but their eagerness betrays they don’t have the foggiest what that will involve.
Many years ago a man presented himself to the bishop of Johannesburg for ordination. ‘Do you want to be ordained?’ asked the bishop. ‘Certainly not,’ said the man. ‘In that case,’ said the bishop, ‘I shall be pleased to ordain you.’ Deacons need to have a right expectation of how costly Christian service will be.

Sometimes you will feel tired, unappreciated, and at your wits’ end, pushed to the very limit. As we persevere in living out our service, we will become more accustomed to thinking like servants. Jesus’s servanthood cost him everything. He was mocked and spat on and flogged and killed. Eventually James too would be executed, and John would be imprisoned. Are you ready for anything Jesus might ask of you?

Lastly, and most importantly, we need to look at service. Jesus is our example: not grasping equality with God but making himself nothing. That is true greatness, and the more we look at him, the more we want to be like him, and to reflect his image to the world.

Earlier this month people parachuted into Normandy to re-enact the D-Day landings. They dressed in World War Two-style uniforms and very much looked the part. But France only needed to be liberated once. The re-enactment simply glorifies that achievement seventy-five years ago.

Jesus rendered us a service we cannot and need not repeat. The Son of Man ‘gave his life as a ransom for many.’ He liberated us from slavery and sin: one life offered for the lives of billions. We need to behold that man: ‘This is what I have done for you,’ he says; ‘what will you do for me?’

You look like deacons; why not make it a life goal to think like deacons. Learn it, live it, look at it. Look at him!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.