30 June 2018: 10 am Ordinations
Petertide
1 Samuel 3: 1–10; Romans 12: 1–13, John 13: 1–17
The Rt Revd Dr Alan Wilson, Bishop of Buckingham

Well, congratulations. Today is the day you climbed into squeaky clean new clerical gear and came here to be ordained deacons in the church of God.

Thank you for your courage and faith in responding to God’s call, for some of you over many years and with many twists and turns in the way.

Thank you, also, to everyone else who has come to support you. Wherever your place on a faith spectrum, thank you for honouring us with your presence. You are equally welcome at our party here today.

In the Acts of the Apostles Chapter 6 we read this laying on of hands to make Deacons goes back, almost to the beginning. It is the primary, original form of Christian ordination. That’s why all formal ordained ministry, as the Church of England understands it, is based on deacon ministry. As long as you manage not to change your minds in the next ten minutes, you’re on. You never stop being a Deacon, from here on in.

Jesus commissioned his disciples to go and teach the world to do what he commanded.

He commanded lots of general things — love as I have loved you — love God, love your neighbour as yourself — but he gave three particular instructions.

Baptise, Break Bread (we’ll do that later), and, last but by no means least, Wash the feet of your sisters and brothers, as I did for you.

It’s all about the night of Jesus’ arrest in the upper room. Leadership and power were very much in the air. The company had come up to Jerusalem after three years on the road. They entered the city with cheering crowds who tore down palm leaves to carpet Jesus’ path. They had come to take power. Even their mummies had got the idea, and were jockeying for the best jobs for their sons — How are you going to give out cabinet posts, master? So as Jesus’ company of friends gathered for dinner, they felt power in the air.
There’d be opposition, but the disciples would deal with that: they will never get you, Lord. We will go out and die with you.

After bread and wine and foot washing, things went South. Everything they had hoped for in the Jesus movement was wiped out. They fled as Jesus was taken out and crucified.

What remained of that dinner was the memory of bread and wine, but equally important, that Jesus took a towel and washed his disciples’ feet.

Perhaps over the past two thousand years his followers have been more emphatic about bread and wine than washing feet.

That’s a shame, because Jesus’ followers still do serve others, as they have always done.

Things have often gone seriously wrong in the Church, but it has an incredible record of loving service all over the place, often in small acts of love and kindness, even sometimes on a grander scale.

Jesus made foot washing the distinctive sign of ministry.

By doing this He was saying something very powerful. The acid test of a healthy church is not numbers, nor whether people enjoy church, nor yet how good and holy churchgoers feel. How is power used among us? Tragically often we’ve got it very wrong but how power is used among us is the acid test of Church life.

So servant leadership is not just some bolt on for the Church; it is the only way for the Church to be the Church, authentically, in the world.

Religion is about service, not voodoo. There’s a lot of magic in Christ Church, the home of Harry Potter magic. But before you get carried away by it, let me just leak you a wry secret about it.

It is said that a few years ago a pious lady became very distressed that the gift shop here was selling plastic Harry Potter magic wands. She complained to trading standards and a bald man with pebble glasses and a clipboard came down the hill from the City Council, a kind of official minion, and confiscated the stock of plastic magic wands. They were taken for testing in the secret trading standards lab deep in the bowels of the City Council. And a few weeks later the bald man in a white coat with pebble glasses and a clipboard brought them back from the lab. It’s OK to sell these here, he said, because, and you must remind the public of this whenever you dispense magic in Christ Church, the City Council has tested these products in our lab, and they don’t actually work. So
we are allowed dispense a bit of magic in Christ Church, but only after we remind people that the magic doesn’t actually work. And that includes religious magic.

We all have our own religious magical moments. For some it’s choral evensong, or superheated planning to convert the nation with your chums. For others it’s praising the Lord and rocking along with a music group that thinks it’s Led Zeppelin. It could even be the kind of thing we’re doing here this morning. But whatever turns you on in Church, I say, Enjoy it by all means, please enjoy it, but for pity’s sake enjoy but don’t inhale.

Because the moment you inhale the first thing that goes out the window is the towel. And when the towel goes out the window church for you becomes all about power and showing off and having fun and being right, symptoms of Pharisee disease. I say Pharisees but it afflicts all professional guardians of the sacred.

Now Pharisee disease is pernicious nonsense. Jesus went on and on about it, for chapters on end. Pharisee disease is the devil’s best trick for seducing good Christians from their allegiance and their duty. And because the litmus of a decent church is how power is used among disciples, Jesus tells us, whatever you do, to beware the leaven of the Pharisees (Mt 16:6).

Pharisee disease makes you worry more about religion than human beings.

Mug up the woes of the Pharisees. Pin Matthew 23 up in your study. It is a battery of amber lights, and if one of them comes on, for God’s sake do something about it.

If you find yourself scouring land and sea energetically to make converts but all you’re bothered about is how many, not their quality of life, that’s an amber light coming on. Should you ever find yourself obsessing about externals more than internals, that’s another amber light. If you start laying burdens on other people you wouldn’t carry yourself, that’s another one. When you start obsessing about Bible verses but forget the big Bible story of justice truth and freedom, that’s another.

Worst of all, if you get a taste for dressing up in long robes and standing around praying in public, and having everybody say how marvellous and holy you are, that’s a dirty great amber light. Jam the anchors on, quick. Because if you don’t you’ll break your heart, and lose the script on the servant ministry thing Jesus did when he took the towel and washed the feet of his disciples.
Now you may say Of course I worry about religion. I’m a professional or semi-
professional guardian of the sacred. I’ve got a church to run here.

Well, I know we all have. All of us here today wearing funny robes are Pharisees. But as
you go about your religious duties can you aspire, for God’s sake, to be one of the good
Pharisees, not the bad ones?

There are in fact good Pharisees in the Scriptures.

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night and opened his heart to the Spirit who goes wherever
she wants not where we planned.

Gamaliel stood back from being a manger, and decided to leave the next stage for God to
sort rather than trying to control everything. Good Man.

Saul, Pharisee of the Pharisees, was knocked off his horse by the light, can you imagine
that, blinded, and thrown to the ground. Then his mission action plan to squash the
Christians got turned inside out. He began to live by grace through faith instead.

So there are good Pharisees in the Bible.

To stop your amber lights coming on, you need to strive to be like them. Forget Annas
and Caiaphas, the dirty old men who obsess about religion and small print, and
protecting their reputations and their holy place. They do their business at night. They
scheme and scapegoat in the shadows.

Beware the leaven of the Pharisees said Jesus, and he knew what he was talking about. If
you don’t it will break your heart and corrupt your soul.

The best medicine against Pharisee disease is service, says Jesus Christ.

When you take up the towel and get on with the job, there’s hope. There’s good news,
and life to the full, and joy and hope.

So when the phone goes and it’s a bloody undertaker, or someone’s hassling you to visit
like you said you would, or there are rotas to do, or awkward damaged customers
banging on the door, rejoice. It’s antibiotics for Pharisee disease.

I used to think, said the distinguished divinity professor, that people distractions were
taking me away from my job, but in the end I realised the people distractions were my
job.
If the Church of God in your generation can do a decent job of taking up the towel and
doing what Jesus did, perhaps there will still be a church in 100 years’ time. And if we
can’t forget it. God will do the job some other way.

When we take up the towel, we do so not on our terms, but on theirs. That’s never easy.

My friend Janet Pilbeam’s father-in-law was a gentle sweet old man of 92. He had to go
into hospital. How is he? She asked. Well he’s all right, said the nurse, but yesterday
evening he bit me. Bit you? Yes. All I was trying to do, she said, was help him by taking
out his false teeth. Ah said Janet. Here’s the thing. He is 92 but he doesn’t have false
teeth!

We take up the towel for their needs on their terms not ours, right?

So that is the basis of all ministry in the Church of England — how we do it as well as
what we do. The things you do, and the ways you do them bear witness to what at the
beginning was called the Way.

For us, in the church and in the world,

There is a new way to live:

you show wisdom by trusting people;
you handle leadership, by serving;
you handle offenders, by forgiving;
you handle money, by sharing;
you handle enemies, by loving;
and you handle violence by suffering

Imagine a world, imagine a Church where

we show wisdom by trusting people;
we handle leadership, by serving;
we handle offenders, by forgiving;
we handle money, by sharing;
we handle enemies, by loving;
and we handle violence by suffering

Why not? Over to you…