30 June 2018: 10 am Ordinations

depertide

1 Samuel 3: 1–10; Romans 12: 1–13, John 13: 1–17

The Rt Revd Dr Colin Fletcher, Bishop of Dorchester

Today is a great day – A great day for those of you being ordained deacon. A great day for those of you, your families and friends who have made this journey over several, or possibly, many years, with them. A great day for the parishes about to receive them.

And many of us will, I suspect, be meeting again in a year’s time at their priestings. And it’s that that causes some confusion in the minds of many. People who see what is happening today as the start of a kind of ordained apprenticeship which will be completed in June 2019. But, as our readings remind us, to be ordained deacon is a lot more than that.

For those unfamiliar with the word, to be a deacon is to be a servant. It is to reflect a pattern of service in ministry – whether the service outlined by Paul in Romans 12 – or the service demonstrated by Christ himself when he washed the apostles’ feet – that menial task usually done by the household slave. One which the apostles did not do for each other – but which Jesus did for them.

So, in becoming deacons, you are becoming something which is fundamental to all ordained ministry. It is the foundation and the bedrock. Who knows, most of you will be ordained priests, some of you may be ordained bishop, but none of you will ever cease to be a deacon as you serve in ministry.

And I stress that because every now and again you will be tempted to think that something diaconal is beneath you. Most often it comes out in the phrase ‘I wasn’t ordained to do that’. Now sometimes that’s true. All of us have limited time, skills and resources. There will be many times when you will not have done all that you might have been able to do – and there will certainly be times when people deliver a broad hint, or perhaps tell you straight, that you have failed to do what they considered to be a priority. And when those criticisms come – and they will from time to time – don’t let them overwhelm you – after all we are all accountable to God in the final analysis rather
than our fellow human beings – but do allow yourself to pause and reflect. Have I fallen into the trap of thinking that that thing – whatever that thing was – was beneath me.

It’s a dangerous trap – because diaconal ministry is the continuing foundation of all ordained ministry. But it’s not just the foundation – remember it’s also the pinnacle of all ordained ministry. Being a priest or a bishop are both wonderful callings but neither are the pinnacle. If we are following the pattern that Christ laid out for us, being a servant is the highest calling of all.

It was Jesus himself who said ‘The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many’. It is Jesus here in our Gospel reading who takes the role of the menial servant in washing their feet.

Becoming a deacon is the pinnacle of ordained ministry. And part of the role of the deacon is, by their life, to enable all God’s people to become more diaconal. For our calling as the whole people of God is to be the servant of others. Not restricting that to members of our congregations or people we get on with or like but to all.

Here in this diocese our central aim is to become a more Christ-like Church – a Church that is growing to be more Contemplative, Compassionate and Courageous. There is not time today to begin to unpack that, but, in a sentence, we will do that as we become ever more diaconal. As we learn what it means to serve one another and to serve all those around us.

You don’t need to know me very well to know that one of the many things I love about the Church of England is its parish system. The fact that everyone lives in a parish – and that our calling is to serve everyone without exception. And that is a challenge you will face ever more powerfully in the years to come.

The impact of austerity is real. We will never again see the levels of public services, nor the manner of their delivery, that we saw in the latter part of the last century. Changing demographics and societal and cultural trends raise their own challenges.

But with the challenges come fresh openings and opportunities. I think that this is a very exciting time to be ordained. Doors are now opening that were closed for many decades. And the key question is whether or not we will choose to walk through them – as a more Christ-like Church willing to serve in His name.
And your calling, as is mine, as deacons in God’s Church, is to help the whole Church to serve in this way loving God and loving our neighbour as ourself. It will stretch you at times, but it is also the pinnacle as well as the foundation.

May God bless you as you leave here in a few minutes’ time to serve as deacons in His Church.