

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany 6th February 2011.

Sermon preached by Rev'd Marilyn Hope on the Diaconate.

I am going to break one of the unwritten rules of preaching and not focus on the readings, if I may. Today we have a new Deacon at the altar, and some of you will have been at the ordination yesterday and when the Archbishop asked us all whether we would support and encourage them in this ministry of Deacon, will have responded, "We will, by God's grace." The "order and ministry" of deacons is not very well understood, and I thought I might reflect on this ministry with you this morning. I think it is important because the better we understand the role of a deacon, the better we will understand the role of the baptized lay person in the church. I say that because I believe that the Deacon is really a person set aside to represent "baptised Christian" writ large. There is nothing that a deacon can do that any lay person can't do, so in that sense it is very different to the ministry of priests compared with the rest of us.

One of my favourite quotes about deacons is from a letter of Bishop St. Ignatius to the Trallians, written some time in the first century. He wrote; *Everyone must show the deacons respect. They represent Jesus Christ, just as the bishop has the role of the father, and the presbyters (those we call priests in more modern times) are like God's council and an apostolic band. You cannot have a church without these.*¹ Deacons are *the face of Christ*; that is our Position Description if you like.

Historically deacons are referred to in the New Testament, in the Acts and in the Epistles. In the early church there were the bishop and his deacons, and only later that more presbyters were needed because the Christian communities cities became too large for one bishop to celebrate the Eucharist for all. Deacons had a large say in who would be priested, and administered the material goods of the church, which in later centuries became quite something to administer. We have a small chapel of St Lawrence, who was a deacon martyr in the 3rd century. The story goes that the Roman authorities came to get the riches which they knew the deacon had charge of, so Lawrence rounded up all the poor of the church and presented them as the church's wealth. He was then martyred by being toasted on a gridiron. He is reputed to have joked with the executioners by asking them to turn him over as he was done on that side. At this time the deacons and presbyters were equal under the bishop's authority, and it was

only in the early Middle Ages that the steps of ordination started to come in, so that a candidate for ordination went through the four minor orders of doorkeeper, reader, exorcist, acolyte, and then sub-deacon, deacon and finally presbyter, with the bishop as the leader of the local church with all the baptised. The Anglican Church has always only had the three orders of deacon, priest and bishop, and only in the last 40 or so years has the distinctive or vocational deacon come back into recognition.

So, if a deacon is a baptised member of our community writ large, how might we understand the representative nature of the diaconal ministry? There are three aspects I would like to focus on, namely service, witness and liturgy.

I am going to start with the last one, because here we all are at this moment, around the family table, as it were. And we are all necessary for this service. The priest needs us, to be able to celebrate the Eucharist, and we, the community of faith through our Archbishop, have nominated the priest to ritualise our gathering of breaking the Bread and the breaking open of the Word in Scripture. And the bishop is present vicariously through the "vicar" he has appointed in his absence. So we all here!

The Deacon has one foot with you and one foot in the sanctuary, sometimes focused on you, and sometimes focused towards the presiding priest. So when focusing on your role in the Liturgy, there are times when the Deacon leads prayers that everyone is saying, or gives directions such as "Go in the peace of Christ" which is a direction for the priest as well as the people in the pews. And note, the deacon brings in the Gospels, which we all have been living out since the last celebration and which in the early church the deacon would have guarded with his life, and then takes them out again, so we can all live them out, and again so he/she can keep them safe till next we meet. There are times in the liturgy when the deacon focuses on the president, and makes sure that everything is ready and proceeds smoothly so that all the priest needs to worry about is the actual Great Thanksgiving. The Deacon will make sure everything else happens and is taken care of.

The Proclamation or witness role is acted out in this service when the Deacon goes in procession with the Gospels to read from them most solemnly, hence the accompaniment of crucifer and acolytes. The Deacon may even kiss the Gospel book, and sometimes the Gospel is censed. But this is symbolic of what ought to be a part of all ordained and lay ministry. It is

part of all of our living, if only because of the way we live out our values as Christians. An English writer on the Diaconate has said: *the Church* (that is ALL of us) *is a witness to the Kingdom itself, a fundamental sacrament of the eschatological triumphant mercy of God.*ⁱⁱ Like I say, the Deacon is Christian writ large.

Then there is service, and it is from the Greek word for service *diaconia* that the word Deacon comes. It is easy to just see this as the charitable work of the Church, or the outreach ministry that is done. But it is meant to be more than that, in the same way it was for Jesus, who came to serve us not to be served. It is also about the self-emptying of Jesus, who although he was rich, for our sakes became poor. And this is where it is probably easiest to identify and recognise the "face of Christ" in people, but there are many other ways in which our attitude to others and our respect and care of others, and our own inner peace, will also reflect "the face of Christ".

So Jill starts her curacy at Christ Church, and this is something for all of us to celebrate and be a part of. You as the baptised faithful have a role in helping Jill to get hold of this deacon thing, just as much as the Vicar. The more we live as the "face of Christ" the more we can teach Jill about diaconal ministry and the more she can teach us about being fully Christian.

So I am going to ask this congregation the same question the Archbishop asked yesterday; *Will you support and encourage her in this ministry?* To which your response will be, **We will, by God's grace.**

ⁱ Ignatius, *Letters to Trallians* 3

ⁱⁱ Christine Hall, *The Deacon's Ministry* 37.