



DIOCESE OF
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Ordination Charge to the Deacons Peter-tide 2023

The wise man built his house upon a rock, the wise man built his house upon a rock, the wise man built his house upon a rock and the rain came tumbling down.

I've no doubt that after the lengthy, arduous, and expensive courses of theological study upon which we've sent you for the last two or three years that you could all complete the rest of that ditty – with both words and actions – if you were called to. The conclusion of the song of course is that those who build on firm foundations, on rock – well their house stands firm. Those who build on sand, on shifting foundations – their house falls flat.

Tomorrow you are about to take an extraordinarily important step on the adventure of discipleship and ministry to which God has long called you. This adventure began at your baptism which saw you signed and sealed for Jesus with the mark of his cross. Your journey continued through your confirmation and with a growing sense that God had something particular in mind for you – for ordained service in God's Church. Tomorrow I will lay hands upon you to ordain you as a deacon – someone set apart for an especial role – a minister of God's people. This will see you serve as an ordained person down the years and for the rest of our lives – once you've got into all this it's incredibly fiddly to get out of. In due course our expectation is that in a year's time you will be ordained priest as well and heck, who knows, some of you may have the great joy of serving as bishops. But as far as ordained ministry goes it all starts tomorrow with your becoming deacons.

Going back to my opening lyrics, what is the foundation on which you are going to build all this future that lies before you? What is the rock on which you're going to construct your house, and how can you make sure that you're not going to end up building on sand?

The ordination service certainly does not duck or shy away from the gravity and depth of what you're committing to. Listen to some of its words:

In the name of our Lord, we bid you remember the greatness of the trust in which you are now to share: the ministry of Christ himself, who for our sake took the form of a servant. Remember always with thanksgiving that the people among whom you will minister are made in God's image and likeness. In serving them you are serving Christ himself, before whom you will be called to account. You cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength, but only by the grace and power of God. Pray therefore that your heart may daily be enlarged, and your understanding of the Scriptures enlightened.

Pray earnestly for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

A great trust is being laid upon you to serve not only all of us made in God's image and likeness but Christ himself. A trust for which we shall be held accountable. A weight we cannot hope to bear in our own strength – only through that which God gives us through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So, what's the rock on whom you are going to build for the future? None other of course than Christ. And so, our first task as deacons is to commit to growing daily more and more like him. And that means our principal responsibility is to open ourselves more and more to Christ inhabiting and being present to every moment of whom we are and of all that we do. Here in this Diocese, we start lots of meetings through a practice known as 'Dwelling in the Word' where we reflect more and more over a year on just a single passage of scripture. This year's passage is Romans 12: 6-16a. Let me read it to you now:

'We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.'

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil, cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another.'

Imagine what it would be like if the presence of just these words in which Christ is to be found, let alone those of the whole of scripture, were to be apparent in our every thought, every action, every decision, every conversation, every breath that we have and take. Enabling us to love sincerely, honour each other, be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer, hospitable in practice, fully present to those among whom we are placed whether rejoicing or mourning, in harmony together.

Christ is the rock on whom we must build. His word in our hearts the foundation of all that we do. Your ministries will at times encounter the rains coming down and the floods coming up. When we dwell in Christ then our house will stand firm. So, commit yourselves to dwelling in his word. Meeting him in the sacraments. Encountering him through the gift of the Spirit. Finding him in the image of God that's present within every person that you will serve.

And there's another aspect of our choice of foundation that I'd like you to think about today. Before you are ordained, in gloriously dense, theology laden and at times mediievally splendiferous language you will make your oaths and declarations – to our inheritance of faith, about our liturgical practice (no crossed fingers at that point please), to the sovereign and to the office that I happen to hold at the present time as bishop of this diocese. The preamble to all of this holds the line about the Church of England that 'Led by the Holy Spirit, it has borne witness to Christian truth in its historic formularies, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests and Deacons.' There's much in this to like. Who could be other than enamoured by the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion and the Book of Common Prayer?

But I think the order of ministries is wrong. In the unlikely event that I were ever called on to rewrite the introduction of the oaths, I would want to speak not of bishops, priests and deacons but of deacons, priests and bishops.

For in my view, as far as the ordained ministry goes, it is our ordination as deacons that serves as the rock on which everything else stands. It's the foundation on which everything needs to be built.

This is reflected in some of the words that will be used during tomorrow's service:

Deacons are ordained so that the people of God may be better equipped to make Christ known. Theirs is a life of visible self-giving. Christ is the pattern of their calling and their commission; as he washed the feet of his disciples, so they must wash the feet of others.

We are here, the whole church is here, every human life and all of creation is offered the possibility of reconciliation and new beginnings because Jesus gave his life for us on the cross and rose again for the dead, giving his life as a ransom for many. His very identity, the foundation of all that Jesus does is self-giving love. As our liturgy tomorrow says, that self-giving love, which lies at the very heart of Christ, lies at the heart of what it means to be a deacon. It is central to a deacon's calling and commission. That self-giving love is exemplified by the Biblical symbolism that is the washing of feet. It's a symbol of humility and vulnerability, of service and attention – of the very heart and depth of love.

In a few moments' time, Ruth and I are going to wash your feet. The rain's going to come down. The flood's going to come up. As we wash you, we invite you to know that what we are doing is the foundation of all that we are as deacons and of all that you will be and of all that you will do. It's the rock upon which the house that we build stands firm. Amen.

+ Michael.

