

Jeremiah 1:4-9
Psalm 99
1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5
Luke 22:19-27

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St. Asaph's Cathedral
Ordination of Deacons
Birth of J Bap 6/24/23

“Ond yr wyf fi yn eich plith fel un sy’n gweini.” “But I am among you as one who serves.”

Shwmae! Bore da. Katherine Dw’i. Rhy’n dod o Virginia. Dwi’n dysgu Cymraeg. Dw’in dysgu Cymraeg ers mis Medi diwethaf, ond dwi’in gwybod tipyn bach yn unig. Heddiw, dwi’n mynd i siarad yn Saesneg. Esgusodwch fi, os gwelwch yn dda. Diolch yn fawr.

I hope you will not mind if I begin with a personal word of thanks, to you Bishop Gregory, to archangel Michael Balkwill, to the clergy and people of the Diocese of St. Asaph, to the Cathedral Church of Saints Asaph and Cyndeyrn, and especially to this remarkable group of people who are offering themselves to become deacons today, as well as all of you, their family and friends who are here to support them, for the invitation to be here with you today and for the great privilege to preach at this ordination. I bring you greetings from the Virginia Theological Seminary, its Dean and President Ian Markham, and its Center for Anglican Communion Studies.

I’d also like to give a shout out to Saint John the Baptist. Today is the Feast of his Nativity. (It’s his birthday.) Even though I’m not preaching on the lessons for his day, it may be important for our deacons to remember every year, on June 24th, that, like John, they are choosing to *decrease* the focus on themselves, in order that we can all *increase* our focus on Jesus Christ and the diaconate of the Church that witnesses to him, of which these seven deacons are a sign.

What an exciting day, both for these “almost reverend” deacons and for the Church as a whole, especially our part of it, the Anglican Communion of Churches throughout the world. What a gift for all of us to be present here today. We can already sense the power of God the Holy Spirit working through the tradition (the sacred words we hear and speak, the music we hear and sing), and also doing a new thing, something so new, that we don’t even know what it is yet, that will happen as a result of what God is doing here today.

For the last few days these deacons have been thinking and praying a lot about what it means to be a deacon, about the calling and work of a deacon, and about what all of that means to them personally as they become ordained to the diaconate today. I can tell you that they are amazing and wonderful, both talented and hard-working, just the sort of people the Church needs today for some of its most important work. It has truly been a privilege to get to know them, at least a little bit, and to be a small part of their preparation, which has been much more extensive than the few days we spent together, of course.

The lessons for today have been chosen to help us reflect on the particular vocation and work of deacons. As we have already heard, all members of the Church are united with Jesus Christ in Baptism and called to serve him as disciples, as ambassadors, and as witnesses to his love for all people. Then why does the Church need deacons? First of all, to remind the rest of us of this vocation of service. Every time we see a deacon in action, we are reminded of God’s love and concern for the world and everyone in it. Secondly, because there is a variety of gifts that God’s

Spirit pours out on the Church, there are some people who are especially gifted for loving service to others. Deacons show us what God's love looks like and teach us how to do it. It isn't easy to be a deacon, which is why we will be praying for them and supporting them in their work.

Jeremiah's call story reminds us that deacons are not made by accident, or by someone's whim, either their own or someone else's. They are chosen by God for this ministry and God has been preparing them for this vocation from the beginning, giving them models and mentors, drawing them into experiences where they can feel God's presence as they keep watch with someone in pain or confront unjust structures of society. When they worry that they may not be expert or qualified enough to do the sometimes difficult assignments they are given, and like Jeremiah, say "I don't know how to do this. I'm only a deacon," they can expect to hear God's answer, "No, you're not. You're a Deacon plus Me." Don't be afraid, I will tell you what to do." Needless to say, Deacons need to be praying regularly, listening and learning from other care givers, and sticking together. You all are going to have each others' backs, to be there to encourage each other. You'll want to find a way to meet or at least Zoom regularly. Your work isn't easy.

If we have any doubts about the ability of God to help these deacons, Psalm 99 should remind us that God who is Holy loves justice, answers those who call upon him, and forgives us when we get it wrong. And when we turn to Paul, we are told that "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." God's foolishness? God's weakness? What is Paul talking about? How could a foolish and weak God help anyone? What is foolishness in the eyes of the world, says Paul, referring to the cross of Christ, turns out to be the only thing that can save us; What looks like weakness (the death of Jesus on the Cross) is in fact the most powerful remedy against Sin and Death. "Death is conquered; we are free; Christ has won the victory!" Paul goes on to remind the Corinthians that it wasn't because they were so great, so strong, or so wise, that God chose them and called them. I suppose the modern equivalent is to remind ourselves and these deacons that ordination isn't a prize that you win because you're so good or because you're so smart or because you're experts of some kind. God looks on the heart and you will be changed by the very fact of your call: you will become what God needs you to be as a deacon in the context to which God sends you. You will grow wise and strong because of the work God gives you to do. You wouldn't have been called if God didn't think you could do it.

All of this is totally opposite to the so-called wisdom of the world that spends its time and energy trying to figure out who is the greatest? I don't have time to talk about all of the ways in which we human beings do this, but I don't have to, because you can think of hundreds of examples, in the media, in every organization you know, including the Church sometimes, I'm afraid. The disciples of Jesus, on their last night together, when he's just told them that one of them would betray him, ask which of them could do this (who is the worst?) and their very next question is: who is the greatest? Which one of them is "most likely to succeed"? Jesus says, Forget all that: however greatness is defined, that's the way the world thinks! Who is greater? The one who orders a meal at the restaurant or the waiter? Of course, the world will say the one sitting at the table; but, he says, I am among you as One who serves. What Luke's Gospel says here is matched by John's Gospel where Jesus washes his disciples' feet. He chooses the role of a servant and tells them that he has given them an example to follow.

Deacons have a difficult balancing act. I sometimes tell my students: “Deacon is not Greek for Doormat.” Remember Jeremiah and don’t let people walk all over you or put you down because you are not a priest or a Bishop. The diaconate is a full and equal order in the Church and if some of you later become priests while others do not, there is no reason to let that divide you. Once you’re a deacon, you’re always a deacon. And a deacon who remains a deacon is not a failed priest. Both vocations are important and the Church needs both of them. At the same time, as you are gently or sometimes not so gently asserting your God-given authority to proclaim the Gospel, to confront and challenge unjust structures, and to call the Church to serve the world around it, remember that the word of the cross points to a kind of power very different from that which most of the world thinks is wisdom.

You won’t sort all of this out in the first week. But you’ll be fine because God has chosen you and called you. The Holy Spirit will give you words to say when you are standing in the pulpit, or standing before the authorities or standing up to a Church that wants to act like the world. But remember to do it the way you think Jesus would do it, as a servant of Jesus Christ.

God does the calling and the forming and the training and sometimes the re-booting of your vocation as deacons. Bishop Gregory will invoke the power of the Holy Spirit of God and lay hands on you on our behalf. Please know that our thoughts and prayers go with you everywhere you go. Wow, You’re called to be a deacon!