



**Sermon preached by Bishop Martin at the Ordinations in
Chichester Cathedral on Saturday 29 June 2019**

Truly Some people think that the Church is a very hierarchical institution.

Well they are not completely wrong, and we do seem to have a lot of ranks and titles that can be very confusing. For example, you might never have heard of a Prebendary. These are fairly special clergy, and there are probably a few of them here today. They are generally user-friendly and like some species of rare birds, they can be detected by a distinctive red plumage in their uniform.

But in comparison with the church's titles and forms of address, the aristocracy is much, much more complicated. In order to explain this to well-brought up children in the early 19th century, the writer, Charles Lamb, composed an introduction to the titles that he could have in the peerage. He starts with being Baron Lamb and goes right up to Duke Lamb before getting to royalty and being king, tsar or emperor. Unfortunately he did not speculate on being burnt at the stake for ambition or treason, in which case he would, I guess, have become roast lamb.

And what's the point of sharing this mildly useless information with you? Well, it is simply this. Those who are being ordained today as deacon are not on a career path of promotion. It isn't like the police force or the aristocracy, where you start off as a curate and get more and more important. Nor is ordination a reward for being an especially keen and enthusiastic Christian, important

though that is and must remain.

These candidates have been seen to be gifted by God with a distinctive propensity for a life of Christian service in the world; they are now handing themselves over to Christ to serve the people of God in making Christ known and offering in worship praise and thanksgiving to God the Father.

The extent of how startling that handing over might be is hinted at in the second reading that we heard, from the Letter of St Paul to Christians at Philippi. Jesus did not cling to equality with God, but handed himself over – emptied himself, is the phrase Paul uses – to become a servant (which is what the word ‘deacon’ means) – and transforming the quality of life on earth.

It is a remarkable thing to imagine handing over the whole of yourself to God in order to bring about a different sort of social environment and a change in the behaviour of people around you. As Christians we describe that environment and its behaviour as the kingdom of heaven, and it is authenticated by two signs: by love and by contemplation.

First, the sign of love. Deacons are commissioned and authorised to love humanity, and to love all creation as God’s gift to us, and to do this out of love of God.

In an era that is characterised by alienation, by fear and the commodification of what God has given us for nothing - like time, relationships, imagination and creativity, land and water - the recovery of delight and reverence in doing something simply for love is something that we urgently need to re-discover.

The deacon must be an agent of this love, which in human terms looks like

kindness, friendship, a social conscience, tolerance of difference (a love which does not condone or condemn), and an abiding commitment to truth as the foundation of justice and peace. But all these expressions of virtuous behaviour all have their origin in what we believe to be true about God, as the one in whom all goodness and beauty also have their origin, and to whom we believe that we are accountable.

In order to accomplish this work of love, my brothers and sisters, you will need the skills of emotional intelligence and social intelligence. You will need to become experts in dispensing the love of God and not the extension of your own affection or enthusiasm. You will need the skill of finding places of heart-break and people who are hurting, and make them your special care for Jesus' sake, no matter how unattractive, unexpected, costly and unresponsive that might be.

Second, the sign of contemplation. That might sound a bit weird and irrelevant, but it is utterly consistent with the scriptural record of what it means to be a deacon.

Jesus describes himself as a deacon: he is “one who serves” in the work of restoring a damaged world, and at his baptism in the Jordan, when a voice from heaven authenticates him in this work he sees heaven open and the Holy Spirit, descend upon him. This is what being contemplative is like: seeing, on earth, a sign of the life of heaven.

Stephen, one of the first deacons in the Church, experiences martyrdom by being stoned, and at that moment he also contemplates heaven open, and the glory of God in the person of Jesus the deacon whom he, Stephen, seeks to love and imitate.

To put this another way, as deacons you are to be Christian ministers committed and attentive to prayer. And beyond the prayer of public worship, for which you will be authorised, you must have a capacity for stillness and attention before God that expands your souls and minds, making you familiar with the life of heaven. This quality of prayer is also a kind of laboratory in which the charism of the emotional and social intelligence of Jesus Christ himself is slowly explored, understood and replicated in your lives.

Many years ago, a religious sister entrusted into my keeping a small bronze statue by an extraordinary artist, Mother Mirabell, of Wantage. It depicts one of the most famous deacons in Christian history: St Francis of Assisi. She shows Francis standing, with the famous wolf of Gubbio sniffing at the hem of his friar's habit. In his hand Francis holds a cross and a dove nestles next to it.

But two other details make the statue remarkably unusual and thought-provoking. The first is the mark of ugly blotches on his hands – material signs of the wounds of Christ, known as stigmata, that result from Francis's intense identification with the suffering of Jesus on the cross.

The second detail is the tilt of the head. He looks upward, but with blinded eyes - not simply as a physical infirmity, but as a symbol of his contemplative experience. Francis has seen the glory of God so intensely in the suffering of Jesus, that, as we would say, he has eyes for nothing else. Blinded by glory, he continues to look into the face of love because he is captivated by the experience of that vision and the intensity of the love of God for him, for him specifically, and he sees that love with the insight of the contemplative.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, who are now to enter the order of Deacon that Francis also entered: my prayer is not only that you will spend your lives

seeking the vision of God that transformed Francis; my prayer is that this vision will so captivate your life and ministry that you will also be instrumental in transforming the Church, as Francis did, into a household wherein the poor find a home, the lost are welcomed, the hungry satisfied with good things, and all things in creation are honoured as the means by which God is both revealed and praised.

All creatures of our God and king, lift up your voice and with us sing,
Alleluia. Amen.