How splendid you all look, candidates in gleaming new clergy vesture, family and friends in loyal support, and all beautifully socially distanced. But here’s a question: Will there be social distancing in heaven? It’s an important question, because deacons are the agents of heaven.

Deacons are the agents of heaven and its outriders, facilitating how we encounter heaven on earth. Deacons are sent out into the wider society in which the Church lives, to create an expectation of discovering the reality of heaven even though we cannot yet see and experience it completely. Deacons are the domestic staff of the household of faith. They invite us to the place where earth and heaven intersect, when Jesus Christ gives us new life in baptism and gives us his life in the word and sacrament of the Eucharist.

As Christians we believe that life here on earth has been designed to help us describe heaven. We believe that heaven is not a physical destination like Corfu or the Isle of Skye, which only some people can afford to visit, or choose to. But we also think that any holiday destination could help us to imagine life in heaven if that holiday brings us refreshment, recovery of our hope and energy, and the renewal of our capacity for gratitude and the finding of delight in God’s creation.

And heaven is not just the things we like best, like chocolate, digital technology or champagne, but without the bad bits, like disease, or income tax, or noisy neighbours. Heaven is the best of the good things God has imagined for us, such as loving grandparents, live concerts, and the smell of fresh raspberries – all of which can help us to seek the authentic and eternal beauty of God.

The Bible teaches us about heaven as essentially the place where God is. In the gospels of the New Testament, Jesus invites us to think of heaven as like a wedding banquet. It’s an image he likes using, and we know that he was a guest at a wedding, when his mother was mortified that the wine had run out and he enabled the banquet to go on by providing a fresh supply.

In many countries, but generally not here, it’s still possible to witness a wedding banquet at which a whole neighbourhood gathers, not simply those that the family can afford to include in an extravagantly expensive reception. There is room for everyone. Social distancing doesn’t feature in this scenario. And in the gospel story that a deacon read to us a few moments ago, Jesus seems to be thinking of himself as someone who has just returned from a wedding party like that. Overflowing with the joy of the wedding, he will do everything possible to gather the household together, even to the extent of waiting on them himself so that they can feel the full exuberance of the celebration.

So it makes little sense to imagine that there could be any such thing as social distancing in heaven. Social distancing speaks to us instead about the trauma of disease and death and grief, and it has also uncovered other, hidden social traumas. We have discovered how often we want to be socially distant from people we do not like or understand: the consequences of that are racism, homophobia, snobbery, and every form of shameful discrimination. Heaven is not like that. And even though sometimes we do need to be social distant from people who can do us terrible harm, deliberately, selfishly and stupidly, this is a symptom of the absence of truth and justice, of life without God and with no vision of heaven.

Deacons are the agents of heaven whose role is to nurture in us the opportunity for capturing a vision of life with God. Jesus also speaks to us about this vision and how it connects earth with heaven: it’s something to treasure, he says.

It’s a connection that can take you by surprise and is astonishing in its intimacy. But unlike Amazon, where you can place an order and complain if it doesn’t arrive, heaven is not a service industry for us to make use of when we have time to spare.

In this pandemic, we have had the opportunity to learn so much from people who have witnessed the death of a loved one. They know that sitting and waiting, simply holding the hand, is what is asked of us when we accompany another person on their passing from this life. Part of the trauma of the pandemic is that in so many cases the intimacy of simply holding the hand has been denied us. But this is a sacred moment, that brings us close to heaven. It speaks to us about life that is a precious gift, not a commodity or a contract.

We are understandably disturbed by the boundary between life and death. We are often uncertain of what to say or do, and how to respond to others who are experiencing grief. Deacons are called to befriend those who find themselves at a point where earth and heaven meet. Deacons have the privilege of offering us the words of Jesus which enable us to understand the intimacy of these moments as we encounter them in our life today.

The prophet Jeremiah described his experience of this encounter in a way that illustrates its intimate and surprising character: “Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, ‘Now I have put my words in your mouth’”.

As a newly-ordained deacon, I was always very struck by this image of the God giving me words to speak, in the special moment of reading the gospel, and I remember that still whenever I give the blessing to a deacon for that purpose. And there is more than nostalgia, here, I think. The gravity of the task of daring to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in the assembly of his Church is one that should not be lost to us.

First, this task demands that we recognise our unworthiness for any such ministry is constantly overwhelmed by the work of God’s grace. In Isaiah’s vision of heaven, a seraph seems to fly down from God in majesty, carrying a live coal for burning incense. It touches the mouth and the seraph declares, “Your guilt has departed, your sin is blotted out.” Deacons, like all of us who minister, stand constantly in need of God’s mercy and grace.

Second, the knowledge of God’s love is given to us with shocking intimacy. St Bernard of Clairvaux was one of the great teachers of Christianity, as Europe emerged from the Dark Ages into the modern era – around the time of the Norman conquest in Britain. As a celibate monk, he writes in these startling terms about the intimate meeting of love that exists within the non-gendered life of God the divine Trinity: “The Father, kissing the Son, pours into him in full the mysteries of his divinity, and breathes the sweetness of love…Only the Holy Spirit is witness, and able to share their mutual knowledge and love.”

Bernard is fascinated by the symbolism of the kiss – not simply as an expression of human love, but as a description of intimate knowledge and self-giving within the life of the triune God.

Candidates for the diaconate, learn from Bernard how to speak compellingly about heaven, as outriders of its manifestation on earth. Learn from Jeremiah and from Jesus Christ, himself a deacon, that this ministry is authenticated in the mystery of worship as the place of intersection between earth and heaven, where all social action and every material need are brought in oblation and thanksgiving. Let your diaconal ministry be the point at which social distance is dissolved by the grace of God’s presence, and let the intimacy of that grace protect you from every managerial instinct that urges you to organise your church’s life within the limitations of today’s fashion. “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” And in that Kingdom there is no social distance. And they can, and do, sing. Alleluia, amen!