**Sermon for Ordination of Deacons, 2025**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today, Alexandra, Andrew, Monique and Jack are being ordained as deacons. That raises three questions for us:

* What does the word ‘deacon’ mean?
* What will they be doing as deacons?
* What will they actually *become* today?

The first two questions are relatively easy to answer.

The word ‘deacon’ comes from a Greek word *diakonos*, which means ‘servant.’ Today therefore, they are being called by Christ, and set apart by the Church, to begin a ministry of *service*.

Bishop Ruth will ordain them in this solemn and beautiful act of worship by praying and laying her hands on their heads – a powerful symbol of the transmission of Christ’s authority and responsibility to them.

To be ordained means to be placed into an *order*, in this case, the order of deacons. It is actually a permanent order in the Church, which benefits greatly from having such permanent deacons. However, in the Church of England it must also be the first ordination undertaken before proceeding to the order of priesthood. Our four candidates today will not therefore become permanent deacons as such, but *transitional* deacons, since each of them also feels called to become a priest.

But for good reasons, to which we will return, the Church always insists on ordaining priests as deacons first. In a very real sense every priest – and bishop – always remains a deacon.

The second question was, ‘What will they be doing as deacons?’, and it too is relatively simple to answer. It is not hard to list the functions they will carry out after their ordination. As deacons in and for the Church, Alexandra, Andrew, Monique and Jack will carry out the following tasks:

* Through self-commitment to others they will seek to mirror the ministry of Jesus himself.
* They will work closely with the diocesan bishop, his suffragans, other clergy and ministers; and traditionally the deacon has a particular mission of serving the bishop at the altar.
* They will work especially with the poor, sick and needy because deacons are set apart especially for the work of mercy in the Church.
* They will lead worship, ministering at the altar when the bishop or priest presides at the service of Holy Communion; deacons traditionally proclaim the Gospel and administer the cup of Christ’s sacramental blood.

So far so good. The list of duties is clear, though as all the clergy present will know, it doesn’t cover everything because when you sign on the dotted line marked, ‘Ready for service,’ you really have no idea exactly what that will entail. But you can be sure that it will need a large amount of stamina to carry it out.

However, after we have worked out *why* they will be called deacons, and *listed* the official things they will do, the third question will not go away, because it is the heart of the matter. What is it *really* about, this becoming a deacon? To answer that, we need to go deeper than merely listing duties.

To help us we cannot do better than consider today’s second reading, from St Paul’s, *Letter to the Philippians*. Paul says there many remarkable things about Christ as servant, which can help us understand better why deacons are necessary in the Church. Jesus - who had been apparently - a workman from Nazareth and a wandering rabbi, suffered the shameful death of crucifixion, condemned for his preaching and unconventional religious practices by both secular and religious law. Yet the Christian community claimed that at Easter he was raised up to new life by God. We proclaim that still!

As the Church reflected more deeply in the power of the Holy Spirit on what had happened, God led them to an even more remarkable truth. This Jesus, so burning with love, so much at the *service* of sinful, suffering humanity, did not just begin at Bethlehem when he was born. Jesus was *already*, *eternally*, *always*, in the form of God. He was God’s eternal Son and Word, always God-shaped! When as Paul put it, he ‘emptied himself,’ he took on a new form, that of a Servant - living a life on earth therefore *both* God-shaped *and* servant-shaped. He limited his glory and humbled himself – and he did it out of love.

Yet he went even further. Having emptied himself of glory, he gave up his life for us, in obedience to the Father’s command. On the cross, as the suffering servant of God, Jesus, like a magnet, drew into himself all the evil of the world, destroying sin and even death itself. ‘Therefore’, Paul says, God raised him from the dead and made him the source of salvation for all. Jesus, God’s Servant, was given the name above all names, ‘the Lord,’ because of what he suffered and was acclaimed as God with us, God who had come to save us. He invites us to follow his way of self-emptying humility, his path to glory through the cross. That is the way of servanthood, to which all Christians are called.

But today, Alexandra, Andrew, Monique and Jack, are being called to do that in a particular way, as ministers ordained specifically for the service of God’s people. Following discernment, prayer and theological training, they are today putting on the form of Christ, the original servant-deacon. Yet such service can never just be about carrying out duties. It has to become a way of life, a consciously chosen path.

Ordination as a deacon happens only once but *growing into being a deacon* needs a lifetime of prayer and response to God. It means conforming one’s life to God’s will, as Jesus the servant did when he carried out his heavenly Father’s will.

* Today therefore, our future deacons are not simply being commissioned as leaders - though their role will involve exercising leadership.
* Still less are they simply being appointed mangers - though their role will involve exercising management.

Much more than that is happening today. They will be changed by being *ordained* – placed into the order of deacons - through the hands of Bishop Ruth. She acts in direct succession with the apostles of Christ and transmits his authority. As she prays over them in the name of the whole Church, the Holy Spirit will come down and conform them to Jesus the Servant. God the Holy Spirit will equip them for Christ’s work of service.

I said earlier that their duties will need a large amount of stamina and that is true. After the example of Jesus, authentic Christian servanthood always entails suffering. But the good news is that because it is Christ’s work which they will share, ‘success’ does not depend on them. Pure grace is being poured out on them today, God’s grace. Yet God does expect a response to his gifts, not just today but every day. Their ‘yes’ said in this ordination service must become an ongoing ‘yes’ throughout their lives: ‘yes’, to becoming a servant, to a life shaped in the image of Jesus.

I also mentioned earlier that they will be transitional deacons because, God willing, they will proceed later to ordination as priests. But it would be false to imagine that on that day they will somehow go up a rung on some ladder. Not at all! A priest does not have a higher calling than a deacon, she or he just has a different one. Yet all vocations have this in common: they are all based on Christ the servant.

A Christian minister can therefore never give up the form of a servant – the deacon’s basic vocation. God help us if we ever do because servanthood is the basic form of Christian ministry and there is nothing higher! As future priests, the best thing that they can carry forward from today is a *permanent deacon’s heart*, namely, a heart shaped like Jesus Christ in his ministry.

May the grace of God enable that to happen; may his grace find an eager response in our four candidates’ hearts, so that the Holy Spirit may bring to completion the good work that is beginning today; and may they have the support of family, friends, parishioners and fellow ministers, as they go forward on this wonderful journey – called, ordained and committed to becoming servants of the Church, in the likeness of Jesus Christ our Lord, the one true Servant of God. Amen