

Sermon: St Andrew's Corbridge, Parish Communion, Sunday 21 October 2018.

Text: Mark 10.35-45

Theme: Once a deacon, always a deacon

May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

The eagle-eyed among you may be surprised that I have dressed down for this sermon! It's not my normal practice. But I've taken off my chasuble because I want to use this liturgical vestment as an illustration. This vestment is called a stole. Stoles are coloured, they normally follow the colours of the seasons of the Christian year, purple, white, violet and green. They are worn by bishops, priests and deacons. In origin, the stole probably derived from the sash worn by officials in ancient Rome, so they designated office – senator, consul, proconsul, etc. The early Church adopted this Roman custom for its ministers. But with a twist, because the Church added spiritual significance. Now a bishop or a priest wears the stole around the neck and hanging down before. But a deacon, and all Anglican clergy are first ordained deacon, wears it like this, over the left shoulder and tied under the right arm.

And part of the spiritual significance of the stole is to see it as a mark of servanthood. So at the Last Supper in John's gospel, John tells us that Jesus removed his outer garment and tied a towel around himself and began to wash his disciples' feet and to dry them with the towel. Jesus takes the lowest place, the place of the household servant, even though he is Lord and Master, and so he sets us an example.

So for myself, in 1981 I was ordained as a deacon and wore my stole like this. The fact that I was then ordained priest does not mean that I ceased to be a deacon. In truth, I am both a deacon and a priest. And at Durham, sometimes I would function in worship as a deacon, and wear my stole deacon-wise.

And as an ordained deacon, I am symbolising the fact that in a very real way all of us are called to be deacons, we are called to be servants. This white alb that I am wearing derives from the white robe given to baptism candidates in the early Church. It is worn to remind all of us that as baptized Christians we are called to walk as children of light. When we confessed our sins today and received God's forgiveness, we were recalled to our baptismal status as forgiven people. And the same is true for our calling as servants – the ordained minister symbolises the call of the whole church to serve, to minister, as those who carry the light of Christ out into God's world by our words and deeds.

I feel a bit sorry for James and John in this morning's Gospel. They got it so wrong. I don't think they were being deliberately pushy. As two of Jesus' earliest disciples, perhaps they thought that had a claim on Jesus – may we have the best seats in heaven? And Jesus gently rebukes them. It was not in his gift, but only in the Father's. But he did challenge them – to sit at Jesus' left and right in glory means following Jesus fully in the way of suffering and death. That was the cup that Jesus was called to drink; that was the baptism that still awaited him at the Cross. In other words, the best seats in heaven are not about status; they can't be earned or demanded as if by right or precedence, but only in utter and costly self-consecration.

And then, to make matters worse, we see all too human resentment and jealousy. The other disciples were indignant with James and John, furious, angry. And so Jesus gives them a vital lesson. Look at the world out there – the powerful, the rulers, they lord it over their subjects and some of them are tyrants – and the world hasn't changed, as today too many of God's children live under oppression, corruption, and persecution. But, says Jesus, 'It is not so among you – if you wish to be great in the kingdom of heaven, you must become a servant, and if you want to be first, then you have to become the slave of all'. And then the punch-line – 'Even the Son of Man' – a title from the Book of Daniel designating one who was presented to the throne of the Ancient of Days – Jesus, the eternal Word, 'Even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many'. The best commentary on those words comes from St Paul:

Christ Jesus, who shares the divine nature, emptied himself, taking the form of a servant; humbled himself and in obedience accepted death, even the death of the cross. Therefore *God* has highly exalted him and given the name above every name.

Any of us can get hung up by status and self-importance. But the Gospel reminds me, reminds us, that servant-hood is the characteristic of authentic Christ-likeness. I hope and pray that I may, by God's grace, be among you as one who serves. If there are chairs to be moved, dishes to be washed, sweeping up to do, I hope I may play my part. But, more than that, I hope that I and we as Church may give ourselves to each other and to this community in loving service. Sometimes that will mean inconvenience, hard work, and denying self. Sometimes it will mean – as Jesus did, challenging status and pride. And in all ways it will mean keeping the image of Christ the servant before us, who takes off his outer garment, ties a towel around himself, and washes his disciples' feet.

In the ordination service for deacons, there are some brilliant if demanding words.

Deacons, the bishop says, are ordained that God's people may be better equipped to make Christ known. Theirs is a life of visible self-giving. They

are to reach into the forgotten corners of the world, that the love of Christ may be made visible. Christ is their pattern, as he washed his disciples feet, so they must wash the feet of others.

What, I wonder, are the forgotten corners of this Parish? Where is Christ's love, at present, not being made visible? Who needs to have their feet washed? Foot-washing is simply a symbol of care, of giving loving attention to people in their needs, whatever their position or rank in the community.

Once a deacon, always a deacon. This strip of cloth reminds me of that truth as I seek to live out my calling. But this is a shared calling. As servants of Christ, in a sense we are all deacons. I hope these bits of cloth will remind *you* of your calling. And may Christ's word and sacrament strengthen us to live obedient and Christ-like lives.