



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist and Ordination of Deacons at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 28 June by the Right Reverend Martin Seeley, retired Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich.

A few minutes ago, Elizabeth read us the correct reading for this service – one that actually talks about deacons – rather than the one I mistakenly sent in to the people putting the service together. In my defence, it was only a matter of one digit – I Timothy 2 rather than I Timothy 3 – but look what a difference one digit makes. Wouldn't 3-0 have been better than 2-0? But it is still a win!

One thing this slip I made means is that our about-to-be deacons, the sacred six, can see that you can be ordained for nearly 50 years, be a recently retired diocesan bishop, and still make rookie mistakes. Mistakes are tools of the trade.

The point of the reading we actually heard was to remind us that what we are doing for Elizabeth, Ingrid, Stu, Claire, Jenny and Di stands in a very long tradition – nearly 2000 years old. The role of deacon became a foundational part of the life of the early church by the end of the first century and has remained so ever since.

On the retreat, we have shared in these past three days, eating, praying, thinking together about what lies ahead for our sacred six, in the incredible heat of these past three days – for which today is such a relief – in the heat, one of our number announced that she had emptied the plastic wastepaper bin in her room, filled it with cold water and put her feet into it – and that that was the best way to cool off. The rest of us got the point but rather balked at using a bin.

But you can imagine, arriving at someone's house for a meal with your sandled feet dusty and hot, just how refreshing and restorative it would be for someone to pour cooling water over them and gently wipe away the dirt and grime, setting you up for the meal you were about to have.

That is the act that Jesus is performing in this Gospel reading we have just heard, washing the disciples' feet, an action that makes absolute sense in the climate and conditions in which he lived and would have been very familiar to his disciples.

It is an act of refreshment, restoration, hospitality, welcome, honouring, kindness and graciousness. Last night, following Jesus' instruction to do the same for each other as he had done for his disciples, Bishop Michael performed this same action

for our sacred six, an act of graciousness and refreshment and above all an act of loving service towards them. Which is at the heart of what it is to be a deacon – to live lives of loving service, imitating, being like Jesus in such a public way that inspires and encourages the rest of us. And a bishop, like a priest, is always first a deacon.

And, in washing their feet last night, Bishop Michael was both receiving all that they are, all they have brought to this point, and setting them up for the wonder and gift of today, and all the days ahead, to be an example for the rest of us.

And that may seem a crazily tall order yet this is what is happening for Elizabeth, Ingrid, Stu, Claire, Jenny and Di.

They are handing themselves over to this life, embracing this life, after long, and for some at times, extremely challenging journeys, during which they only later have come to understand what was going on, looking back, even to times before they became Christian, to see God's gentle hand nudging, encouraging, steering them to this point.

I have had the immense joy – and fun – of being for with them these past three days. And from this brief encounter, I know what many of you know far better, that they each bring to this next stage in their life transforming experiences of God, of the reality of Jesus' real presence in their lives, a transforming presence that has sustained them through painful personal experiences, has steered them through careers and jobs and family and relationships, that has rescued them from depths of dysfunction, that has led them gently to be the remarkable people they are today, living the gift of fuller, freer, joyful lives, living lives with God's peace at the centre.

And now this, this next stage that they have been preparing for far longer than they have been in training. And for which they are letting go of much – scouting, nursing, teaching and nurturing and encouraging children, caring for children and young people. Yet, by God's grace, all that will also be part of who they are in this next stage, along with being a parent, (one, a mother of four boys), or having a passion for community, and for people on the margins, people at the back as we learned on the retreat, or for pilgrimage and adventure, for seeing and being stirred and excited by the world, for study and learning, skills in management, for sport, and of course for football – because they are, our sacred six, today they are all coming home.

And here's the rub. When Jesus washes his disciples' feet this is not just a host offering an expected act of welcome to guests. This is God, God in human form, washing feet. This scene, this event of washing the disciples' feet is the most

profound expression of God being fully God and fully human. This is who and how God is, and this is what God wants us – humanity to be.

We are all called to serve, to serve one another, yes, within the church, and yes, in the affairs and ordering of the world.

This is foundational – we are to serve one another, to serve those inside and outside the church, to serve the needs of troubled people and a troubled world. Which is why deacons are foundational to the church.

And we are to serve in the way of the foot washing – by acts of refreshment, restoration, hospitality, welcome, honouring, kindness and graciousness. That is how God is with us, how we are to be with each other, in and outside the church, and deacons are our constant reminder that this is how we are to be and what the church really is. They are the public walking expressions of what God is calling us all to be. And they do not have to strive or struggle to be so – by virtue of who they are – and you all know this – by who they are, by what they do, and by God working in and through them, they are exemplars of God's loving service.

And they call the church back to what the church is meant to be. This may seem topsy turvy but that is God for you. The newest recruits show us how to be the church, giving themselves, living lives of loving service which, as one of our sacred six put it, "is the richest life you can live."

Which means when the church is truly being the church, it too is a community of refreshment, restoration, hospitality, welcome, honouring, kindness and graciousness. That means openness, that means connection, that means being undefended, that means being unpreoccupied with ourselves, it means being vulnerable, it means owning up and repairing mistakes, it means being humble, it means being inclusive not exclusive, not using rules – or indeed Scripture - to exclude, it means taking down barriers not putting them up. It means being like Jesus, the one who serves by caring for the sick, by confronting injustice, by reconciling the alienated, embracing the stranger, seeking out the lost, comforting the grieving, by drawing all, yes all people to himself.

Elizabeth, Ingrid, Stu, Claire, Jenny and Di we rejoice in who you are and who you are becoming, showing us how the church truly is. Be the wonderful selves you are, filled with God's Holy Spirit. Yes, it will take courage, which you can trust God will give you. I know how much you trust God, and you know how immeasurably more God trusts you. By that trust, God will bless the church and the world. Thanks be to God.

The Right Reverend Martin Seeley
Retired Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich

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