

Ordination of Deacons – Christchurch July 2nd 2016

When I retired just over a year ago, I did begin to wonder if my life would begin to shrink and I started to have visions of walk in baths, of a gentle stroll to the local shop to get my newspaper, and afternoons spent watching ‘homes under the hammer’ or escape to the country’. So, instead of watching yet another edition of ‘pointless’, I turned to one of my favourite poets, Mary Oliver, and to the opening lines in her most recent collection ‘Red Bird’

‘I don’t want to live a small life’, she writes, ‘open your eyes, open your hands.’ It affirmed my deepest conviction that each and every day God says to each and every one of us, but perhaps especially to these folk who are about to be ordained deacon, ‘Don’t live a small life; open your eyes, open your hands and rejoice in God’s call to you to live out in faith ‘your one wild and precious life.’

Sarah Maitland in her book, ‘Big enough God’, writes, ‘God is not careful, is not bound by the rules. God is careless, profligate even. The imagination of God is outrageous. God plays preposterous games. God allows complexity, encourages complexity. God obliges us to play the game of becoming and does not permit us to rest on our laurels, but to go on making things new, making new things.

‘I appeal to you brothers and sisters’, says Paul, ‘do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may discern what is the will of God.’ Where the grace of God is at work, God’s love will draw us NOT into a world of rules and regulations, but into a world of hope and risk, a world renewed and transformed by God’s grace and never has that been more urgent as we chart a way forward in this post brexit world. Please don’t live a small life; open your eyes; open your hands.

The glorious reality is that for those of you sitting in front of me now, all shining and new, God has chosen you for who you are, and God has great plans for you and longs for each of you to go on becoming. So don’t be too anxious today about what you are going to do tomorrow morning on your first day after THIS day and whether you have the skills to do it. You can and will learn the skills that you need. There will be many temptations to draw you into the minutiae of church life and organisation, tying you to the computer and the dreadful curse of the email culture. If you succumb to that temptation you might as well join some exclusive country club because by that time your God will have become very small.

The God in whom we believe is the God of all the earth, the God who breaks through in every age and culture, the God who is not to be confined to the life of the church, however wonderful it might seem to us, because if we go off in that direction our religion will be more tribal than transformative, and the God whom we worship is the God whose love transforms and changes lives, the God who goes on making things new, making new things.

So, continue to rejoice in the God who delights in who you are, and who encourages you to go on discovering where God is already at work in our lives and in the life of the

communities where we live and serve. Look at me; open your life; open your eyes; open your hands. At the heart of the story of vocation is God's invitation to each of us to explore boldly and faithfully our God given gifts. Each of us has to find our own reason for being here, our own unique greatness, our own calling to holiness and love.

What God wants most of all, not just for those who are to be ordained today, but for all of us, is that we continue to be in the process of becoming, of discovering who God wants us to be, growing, changing, and becoming fully alive with God's love so that we can make a real difference for good in the lives of the people and communities where we live and work.

So in these first weeks and months of your diaconate, I pray that you will continue to rejoice in the grace and generosity of our God, so that you can live free from fear, that you can choose love, participation and joy, and that you can realise day by day what you have truly been given!

I was tempted at this point to release some balloons and party poppers in celebration of what is a day of great joy but this is the Church of England! So I held back, and I did so in part because alongside the joy of today is the recognition that this vocation does not come without cost. It will be hinted at later in the service as those of you who have come to the Cathedral today as family, friends and supporters of these folk are reminded of 'how great is the charge that these ordinands are ready to undertake,' They will need your love and your prayers as much after today as before it.

It was 41 years ago, almost to the day, that I stood in Southwark Cathedral for my own ordination. It was a day of celebration, but as I recall it now, it was also a day of some terror. Those who follow the call to the ordained ministry will be put to the test as their vocation, like silver, is tried. You will encounter people, not just inside the church but outside the church, who want to talk with you about what really matters in their lives because your first calling is not to the institution of the church, but 'to the community in which you are set, searching out the poor and the weak, the sick and the lonely, the poor and the powerless, reaching into the forgotten corners of the world that the love of God may be made visible.

As deacons you will be given access into people's lives at moments of great joy and celebration but also in times of real hurt and heartache; to sit alongside and to be with; acknowledging the pain without being able to take it away; you will be given access into communities where over these coming years of austerity and uncertainty you may well be asked to speak up for the weakest, the most vulnerable and the most put upon.

In other words you are called in every context to be exemplars of God's love for the world and its peoples, a love that serves; 'if I your Lord and teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.' It is at one and the same time both costly and also a huge privilege, and in order to fulfil this calling you need to recognise and own your own vulnerability, for it is only when we have entered the depths of our own pain and hurt and in those depths have found hope again that we are able to offer hope to others.

And it is hope above all else that as Christian people, lay and ordained alike, that we are called to carry into our world – a world that we know now more than ever, is at one and the same time both fractured and fearful; hope which is based not on the ebb and flow of our feelings, but on God's call to resist all that diminishes and demeans our fellow human beings. Hope challenges our fatalism and our fear which is why it is so unsettling, but we are called to hope, to dare to kindle and fan an extravagant hope for the future of the whole of humanity and to express it in all that we are and all that we do.

So for all that God can do within us; and for all that God can do without us, thanks be to God; for all in whom Christ lived before us, and for all in whom Christ lives beside us, thanks be to God; for all the Spirit wants to bring us, and for where the Spirit wants to send us, thanks be to God. Listen, our hope is in the Christ who has promised to be with us in the world as in our worship. So, says God, 'look at me; open your life, open your eyes, open your hands.' We go to serve him in hope and in love.

The Rt Revd Peter Maurice