

Deacons Charge 2025

The Health and Safety Executive tells us that we are surrounded by occupational hazards. Tennis players have problems with their elbows. Keyboard operators get repetitive strain injury. Rugby players develop cauliflower ears. And clergy, well if you’ve not already worked it out in the coming years you very soon will, clergy must run the annual gamut of re-enacting each Maundy Thursday and on other occasions like this evening, the Gospel Reading we just listened to, the story from John 13 of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet on the night of his last supper.

There is so much more hazard to this than merely overcoming the cultural heebie-jeebies that afflict many of us at the concept that we might, in public, need to remove our socks, reveal our unclad feet and corns to an audience of friends, colleagues or neighbours and then to have our extremities man or woman handled by the vicar, the curate or even the bishop.

What really gives this activity its ultimate frisson is the knowledge that the washing of feet is an action fraught with mutual vulnerability. For the receiver there’s the knowledge that feet are ticklish, tender, and have lots of nerve endings. ‘Will the new deacon who’s never done this before press down too hard on my bunion?’ is the question. For the washer there’s the hazard of knowing that if you press just that bit too energetically on any sensitive spot, the result may be their foot in your mouth.

So why do we keep on putting ourselves through this?

It’s because Jesus’s washing of the disciples’ feet, so remote from the cultural context and expectation of many of us here, is among the most powerful images in scripture. It could certainly be argued to be the defining image for deacons. As I’m sure you know, when we ordain you tomorrow we shall vest you with your deacon’s stole, whose origin is the towel that was tied around a servant or slave, just as Jesus tied a towel around himself in the Gospel reading we listened to. So as we prepare for you to be ordained as deacons tomorrow morning, let’s dig into this image and see what we can find together within it.

The most obvious things to say, of course, is that footwashing back in first century Palestine wasn’t the exotic, exceptional, and often embarrassing action it is when we practice it in our context. I have washed lots of people’s feet in churches over the years and I can confidently tell you that practically speaking, no foot I have ever washed has in reality actually needed it. I’ve never been presented with a dusty or dirty foot. The only time I’ve ever encountered the true reality of footwashing happened some years ago when, in a former life and in a weak moment I agreed to lead a survey of children’s health across the country of Eritrea in the horn of Africa. One day, trying to find a school where we were due to see children in one of the hottest places on the earth’s surface, my team and I got badly lost. We got so lost that we saw ostriches and jackals. It was all very Isaiah 43. Eventually, after a number of the kinds of arguments that you may have had with one of your loved ones as you’ve disagreed about the best way to navigate your way to a particular destination, we arrived at the tent of the head man of the village in which our school was located. From out the back he produced jerry cans of water and washed our feet in welcome of us, a symbol that said to us – you’re here, you’re safe, we’re going to look after you. It was an extraordinary, practical, delightful service, that left us all feeling utterly honoured and respected.

Now as I’ve said, this specific act of service isn’t something that people in our context tend to need. But other acts of service, that replicate the spirit of foot washing in ways that are appropriate for our settings definitely are. So as we ordain you deacon and as you serve as deacons during this next year, I invite you to search out the ways in which you can offer service that says to those you encounter ‘You’re here, you’re safe, we’re going to look after you. We’re going to honour and respect you.’ From leading the best possible funeral you can for the woman who’s suffered dementia for years in a care home and whose friends have forgotten she exists, to really listening to what a child in reception wants to tell you but can’t quite find the words, from sticking around to put the last table away at the end of the church fete, to taking the minutes at a PCC sub committee meeting because no one else will. Things like this are what it is to wash feet in our context. And don’t forget, it says very clearly in the ordination small print, and that follows us throughout our ministries, that you are being ordained to move chairs.

All this is only to give force to the Gospel’s real twist. As you’ll know, in Jesus’s day, footwashing wasn’t something that would ever have been done by the boss. It was a menial job, to be undertaken by the lowliest functionary. So when Jesus wraps a towel around himself he’s completely breaking the expected norm. He’s telling his team that true leadership isn’t about having it all your way. He’s telling them that true leadership lies in the service of others. To truly honour and care for another, is to put ourselves in the place of the washing of feet. It’s to enter a world turned upside down – or perhaps that should be the right way up - where the first shall be last and the last first. I once heard it described that the best teachers are those who enable us to access information that we receive, almost as if it were something that we already knew, but just needed the teacher’s nudge to bring it back into the forefront of our consciousness. My experience is that when we find ways in which to act in the tradition of the washing of feet, it’s not as if we are announcing some novel, unheard of, radical new way of living in the world and with one another. When, following the pattern that Jesus has given us we act in true service of one another, it’s almost as if we remind ourselves and those who are around us – both those we serve and those who see – that this is where true life is to be found. It is to communicate to these we encounter that we are carriers and enacters of Good News – not in the sense of a kerugma , of beliefs that invite or demand intellectual assent, but Good News that just makes ordinary sense in people’s own terms in the very practical realities of everyday life. Of course the power of such acts to be truly evangelistic is enabled when it’s known and obvious that the engine house that gives us the strength, the will and the perseverance to do these things, and to keep on doing them, is our faith in Jesus. To enable this we’re going to give you a trump card that makes explicit why you’re doing what you do. You’re going to wear one of these. Use them.

Finally there is, in this passage one of those intriguing words that the New Testament throws up that invites us to deep reflection as to who we are and what we are about. It’s the word in the text that says what Judas Iscariot does. It says of Judas that the devil had put it into his heart to betray Jesus. The word John uses for ‘betray’ has a whole range of meanings and subtleties that should make us stop and think. For the word not only means the negative “betray” with all its ideas of treachery, disloyalty, dishonesty, subterfuge, it can also mean to give over, hand over, deliver up. It can also mean ‘to commit, to entrust’, even ‘to commend’. Elsewhere in scripture it can mean ‘to stake, to hazard’. It’s the word used by the Gospel writers to describe Jesus being given, handed over, into the process that leads him to the cross upon which he gains eternal life for us all. The word being used – paradidomi – is also used to describe what we are to do with the Christian tradition that we receive. It is given so that we can hand it on, almost like the runner in a relay team hands on the baton to this team member who will run the next leg.

This is all to say that if we are to take Jesus’s example in John 13 as our pattern for our lives as deacons in God’s Church that this will not only be about modelling Jesus’s acts of service, of taking the place of the slave, not the master in our dealings with others, it will also be about us living within our lives and existence the nature of what Jesus is signed up for and that’s articulated by this word ‘paradidomi’ that John casually drops into his account. Going back to where I began this talk it is to say that through our ordination as deacons we are choosing, as Jesus did, to make ourselves vulnerable. We are opening ourselves to the possibility that we may get hurt. As you wash him on Maundy Thursday that old gentleman’s foot really may arrive in your mouth. As you seek to serve others you run the risk that you will sometimes be misunderstood. As you bear witness to Jesus’s cross and resurrection you will face opposition and the world’s contempt. If we want to insure ourselves against experiencing these things in our lives than getting ordained as deacons is not a very good way to go about that. So why on earth do we bother, why have you gone though all the hassle of selection for ministry, written all those essays and been on all those placements from college? We go through all this because God has set his call upon our hearts to give ourselves to his service, staking and hazarding ourselves because we know that through following Jesus and living his way we meet in him our heart’s desire, find our true selves, live into the fulness of God’s plan for us now and for ever. This is the good news that we have received. It is the good news that in our ministries we seek to hand on.

Lest this all sound a bit too epic, demanding that we are superheros rather than the fallible, human all too capable of messing up people that we know ourselves to be, it’s good to turn back to the example of Peter in our reading where predictably and wonderfully he once again manages to get the wrong end of the stick. John 13 is another of those fabulous occasions where Peter learns once again that it’s not about him, but it is about him. Just as is the case for your ordination tomorrow. At one level it’s not about you. At another level it’s all about you. Peter begins, very naturally that he can’t imagine being served in the manner of a slave by someone he respects and admires as much as Jesus. This is not unreasonable. It’s probably how we would respond too. But them Jesus says to Peter – this is part of the deal. If you want to be in relationship with me, I need you not only to serve me, I need to serve you. Otherwise it’s all one way. And that’s not a real relationship is it? In response to this Peter goes overboard and says ‘In that case, wash all of me. I need the full works.’ To which Jesus says ‘No. I know you. I’ve chosen you. I see the good in you. I know your limitations. But still I trust you. I don’t need you to go into mass self-abasement mode. What I need is for you to continue with me.’

Which I hope are all the things I hope you’ll hear God speak into your heart tomorrow. That as you’re ordained you’ll hear the voice of Jesus saying ‘I know you. I’ve chosen you. I see the good in you. I know your limitations. I trust you. What I need is for you to continue with me’.

Apart from doing things like running around Eritrea recreating Isaiah 43, I spent seven happy years working at Westcott House in Cambridge. A lot of life there was governed by the College bell. It rang to call us to worship. We rang it at other times of special occasion. Around the bell were inscribed the words of 1 Thessalonians 5:24. These say ‘The one who calls you is faithful’. Jesus who came to wash our feet calls you. He is faithful. He wants you. He needs you. He has given his life for you. Thank you that tomorrow you will answer his call. Amen.