

Homily – 4 December 2022  
Rev. Michael Shapcott

Good morning. Today, instead of a traditional homily that draws on the readings for the day, I would like to offer some more personal comments. December 4 – today – is the sixth anniversary of my ordination as a vocational deacon in the Anglican Church of Canada. I don't talk a lot about the motivation and meaning of my ordination. Today, I will...

On this date in 2016, I knelt in front of Bishop Patrick Yu who consecrated me into this most holy and ancient order. In the Diocese of Toronto, deacons are raised up by local parishes. So, I stood in the sanctuary of the Church of the Holy Trinity – Trinity Square as Bishop Patrick turned to the people assembled and asked: "Dear friends in Christ, you know the importance of this ministry, and the weight of your responsibility in presenting Michael for ordination to the sacred order of deacons. Therefore, if any of you know any impediment or crime for which we should not proceed, come forward now and make it known."

Bishop Patrick continued: "Is it your will the Michael be ordained a deacon?" ... and then ... "Will you uphold Michael in this ministry?". In our Anglican Church, the Deacon is called from among the people and raised to diaconal ministry with the consent and support of the people. Six years later, I continue to experience this as a wonderful and sacred duty of service in collaboration with all of you, and with so many others.

Like all Christians, Deacons live deeply in our world and engage in loving kindness with all our neighbours. At my ordination, I was instructed to follow these words: "In the name of Jesus Christ, you are to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick and the lonely." When I joined the order of Deacons, I accepted this commitment: "You are to make Christ and his redemptive love known, by your word and example, to those among whom you live and work and worship" ... and specifically... "[to] look for Christ in all others, being ready to help and serve those in need."

All Christians are bound to love God and love our neighbours. Deacons put loving kindness at the centre of their lives and ministry. We are called to deep engagement with our neighbours in loving and practical ways. My life before ordination was bound up with loving service, determined advocacy for justice, deep engagement with my neighbours – especially those who experience social, financial, racial, gender and other forms of injustice.

Facing the Church, my role as Deacon is to speak truth to power. These words are part of the diaconal ordination: "You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world".

Deacons see those two responsibilities – practical loving kindness and truth-telling – in the account in the Books of Acts of the life and death of the first Deacon, Stephen. He was called from among the early Church to ensure that widows and orphans – two groups facing severe injustice – got their share of food. He stood in front of the religious and political leaders of his

time to speak a powerful truth. He denounced religious and political hypocrisy and was stoned to death without even a trial by angry political and religious leaders.

Let me make one thing clear: I have no aspiration to be killed in a brutal public execution. But I am committed, with my fellow deacons, to face our community with neighbourly love; even as I face towards the Church to call it to account for its roles and responsibilities in our world.

In the last three decades, as Diaconal ministry has become more visible in our Anglican Church, there has been a growing recognition that Deacons are called to offer servant-leadership in fundamental matters that are part of the baptismal covenant of all believers. It's not just Deacons who engage loving service – all Christians are to do so. It's not just Deacons who are to unsettle the Church – all Christians are to do so.

Six years ago, when I was ordained a Deacon, I was presented with two symbols of my office: A towel, to represent loving service (Deacons are often pictured as washing the feet of others in that great Biblical image); and a Bible, meant to signify my authority to proclaim God's word – in actions as well as with words. Some of you will know that one of my tasks on a Sunday morning is to take the big old Bible at the front of our Church, open it to the Gospels (which is the People's Book) and place it on the altar – front and centre of our worship.

It was no coincidence that I was ordained on December 4. In the Anglican Church calendar of saints, today is the day to celebrate the life and ministry of the Deacon Nicholas Ferrar. In the early part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Nicholas left a life as a business person in London and, along with his mother, two nieces and other family members, acquired a derelict farm in the delightfully named community of Little Gidding.

Their aspiration was to create a “godly household” – a place where the ideals of the Christian faith would come to life. The farm was restored to working order. The food produced was distributed to hungry people. Children, both male and, controversially for the times, female, were offered basic education, including reading and writing. Rudimentary health care and other forms of loving service were offered. They created what they called “the little academy” to stage plays that focused on moral and practical instruction.

Alas, Little Gidding did not survive the English Civil War. The Protestant zealots confused some practices of the Ferrar household (for instance, several took vows of celibacy) as a “popish conspiracy” and accused Ferrar of running a “nunnery”. In 1646, four years after Cromwell had overthrown and executed King Charles 1<sup>st</sup>, and about six years before the Restoration of the monarchy, the Protestant army raided Little Gidding, ransacked the chapel and looted the manor house.

Nicholas Ferrar and his family were taking up the ideals that animate our faith – love for our neighbours and love for God – and applying them to their particular time and context. Not everything they did was perfect, nor should we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century uncritically accept all the practices of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Nicholas Ferrar.

His goal of a “godly household” sounds a bit musty and strange to our ears in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, though his goals of engaging in practical service with his neighbours (learning, healing, belonging, feeding) and loving God are both eternal and enduring.

Verna Dozier, an Episcopal lay theologian writing in 1991, uses different language to describe what I think is the same thing. She has written extensively about “the dream of God”.

Michael Curry, the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church in the United States, has written this in his book *The Way of Love*:

“Dreaming is powerful stuff. I’m not alone in feeling it. In 1991, Verna Dozier, a retired English teacher who became an insightful lay theologian and provocative and powerful teacher of the Bible, published a series of her Bible talks and theological reflections under the title *The Dream of God*. It was Dozier who popularized the phrase and mined its biblical origins. She liked to quote Dean Howard Thurman, whom she first encountered at the Howard University chapel on Sundays, and who summarized God’s dream very simply: “A friendly world of friendly folk, Beneath a friendly sky.”

“The idea is that God has something better in store for every one of us, for every society, for the global community, and for the entire human family. It’s what God had in mind when he first said, “Let there be . . .” anything. It is Martin Luther King’s beloved community, where all humans are loved equally, valued equally, respected equally. When it came to moving the world closer to God’s dream, Verna believed that institutional religion was much less important than individuals committed to living out the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

What was God’s dream for the Deacon Nicholas Ferrar? To establish a lively and spiritually engaging farm that would serve the community and proclaim God’s deep love.

God’s dream for all of us is front and centre during this season of Advent. Advent in the Christian calendar is a season for entering into the “dream of God”. Last Sunday, I was part of a spiritual retreat at the Sorrento Centre under the leadership of Archbishop Lynne McNaughton that focused on Mary, Mother of Jesus. We looked at the visitation of Mary by the angels, and Mary’s glorious response in which she magnifies God, and we considered the three-month-long visit of Mary to her relative Elizabeth, Mother of John the Baptist.

In Luke’s account, as Mary embraces her mothering role, she understands that the dream of God is the dream of a world turned upside down from the Roman world of that time, or, indeed, from the world in which we live today. In the dream of God, the proud and the mighty are brought down, and the lowly and hungry are raised up.

In our world, material self-interest is the governing principle. Money talks. Billionaires with riches beyond anything the world has seen command leadership. Might makes right. Where

there is injustice, it is considered the natural order of things, a consequence of an economic and social order that puts profits before people.

Now, imagine a world where loving kindness, respect for the dignity and value of everyone, justice and equity, set the basic standards for how we live and how we treat each other. That's the dream of God that Verna Dozier speaks of... that's the dream of God that Deacon Nicholas Ferrar sought to realize in the 17<sup>th</sup> century... that's the dream of God that Mary received two thousand years ago.

Such a world – animated by God's love and loving kindness – seems about as remote to most of us as the images in today's reading in Isaiah about the wolf living with the lamb, and the leopard with the kid. Nice fantasy, but not in the world in which we live.

The almighty power of the dominant social and economic order has always sought to crowd out any vision of a better world. Even today, the dream of God for social, economic, gender, climate, racial and cultural justice can seem remote, idealistic and irrelevant.

Archbishop Justin Welby, in a powerful little book called "DeThroning Mammon" warns us that "one of the deceits of [of the dominant economic and social order] is to pretend to everlasting life and eternal greatness." He says:

"We may think it is unpleasant to have [the worship of money and power] on the throne, but, at the same time, we have a nasty suspicion that this false god is pretty firmly stuck to the seat, and that the alternatives are too dreadful to contemplate."

Which takes me right back to my diaconal ministry and our collective calling as Christians. Deacons, all Christians, are called to take on the daily work of helping to realize God's dream, right here and right now. That may mean volunteering for the food bank, joining in advocacy for justice, showing up and working hard to realize the dream of God.

And so, on this the 6<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my ordination to diaconal ministry, I recall the beautiful and gentle admonition from Paul recorded in Second Thessalonians 3: 13: "Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right."

The Revised English Bible translates it this way: "My friends, you must never tire of doing right."

The Common English Bible says this: "Brothers and sisters, don't get discouraged in doing what is right."

We don't do it alone. We do the work with each other... and we work to realize the dream of God in loving relationship with the divine.

I will close with excerpts from a re-telling of Psalm 72 by Nan C. Merrill:

Bring justice to the peoples, O Beloved,  
And your mercy to all generations!  
May people be known for mercy, rendering justice to the poor!  
Let their spirits soar as an eagle, let joy abide in every heart!  
May every heart open to your Love from sea to sea,  
From the River of Life out to the universe!  
May fears that paralyze the people rise up from the depths into Your Light!  
May the leaders of nations from all the earth listen to Love's Voice...

Amen.