

## **Archdeacons' Collation**

*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.*

A year ago this weekend, in my inaugural sermon, I spoke of the table of the poor man, Jesus Christ, and of our calling to extend that table into every street and every home so that Jesus, who is already present there, might have a table to sit and eat with those who are hungry and who need him. And we re-committed ourselves in this Diocese to ask God for the grace to become a bigger church, making a bigger difference in our community. To lay the table of the poor man who is our King, the table open to all and the poor Christ feeding all.

And there I said this:

“If you eat the food served here you will never be hungry again. Because the poor man offers the food at this table. And the poor man will serve you, and the poor man's hands are wounded when he serves you, because the food came at a price, and he paid the price.”

And this image of the poor man who sits beside all is in my mind today as we think of the people of France, the bereaved and the suffering and the angry and the frightened. The poor Christ who is there, and will be there, in the banlieues and in the hospitals, the poor Christ who stands and sits wherever people need him, and invites them to the table, a table for all, the table of peace, the reason we are called to be here at all.

And I said:

“The poor man's name is Jesus, who though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor so that through his poverty we might become rich. And if you sit at his table he will feed you and he will ask you to feed others; he will serve you and he will ask you to serve others; he will love you and he will ask you to love others.”

And some months later we all, though our elected Synod, agreed to set ourselves on a journey to become fit for God's mission and to shape ourselves as best we knew, under God's guidance and by His grace, to that we might be ready to lay that table wherever our Lord calls us.

And there I said this:

"We don't want Archdeacon-bureaucrats; we want Archdeacon-missioners and Archdeacon-pastors. Our present Archdeacons have that understanding of their role, but as hard as they work (and they work very hard indeed) the two of them can't be everywhere. We need two more."

And I said:

"This is not for bureaucratic reasons. Quite the opposite. I want to be confident that for each Archdeacon there will be time for the relational, advisory and pastoral ministry to sit alongside the structural and strategic. I want to ensure that our archdeacons are able to respond not only as an "emergency service" in a crisis, but also as a resource in the routine life of the parishes, giving quality and quantity time to their people and their congregations. We need a college of Archdeacons with the time and capacity to smooth the way to growth, so that parishes are able to get the things done quickly and easily that they need to get done to be fit for mission."

And here we are today with that college in view, to welcome Jennifer and Pete and Roger to take their place alongside Ricky in that college, as Archdeacons in the Church, servants of the poor Christ, servants at the table.

How will they do that? And what will they need?

Well, they will need to be clothed.

They don't come to us naked. They are experienced and seasoned ministers of the Gospel, in our own Diocese, in the Diocese of Chester, in the Diocese of Virginia and the Diocese of Washington in the Episcopal Church. But as they begin this new season, they will need to be clothed further.

And what clothing will they need?

This woman and these men, called in this season of their ministry to be archdeacons, are already deacons. They were deacons before ever they were priests, as I was, as all the ordained were and are. The ministry of deacon is the foundational ministry of the ordained, just as the ministry of service is the foundational ministry of us all, all of us who recognise the poor man and invite the world to his table, and serve those seated at his table.

They will do what they do, missioners and mentors, encouragers and challengers, friends and disciples, they will do what they do in the spirit of service, and of the Lord who clothed himself. They will need what Jesus took, when he clothed

himself.

The Bible speaks often of how *we* are to be clothed. In this evening's New Testament reading we heard of it. "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." And again, "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." We are to be clothed in virtue, and in the character of Christ which will be formed in us as we follow him.

And if this clothing in virtue seems hard, if as broken and sinful people our clothing in virtue so often looks more like filthy rags, the Scripture gives us a deeper promise of clothing; for again in Galatians we hear: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

So Jennifer and Pete and Roger and Ricky are clothed in Christ and are to clothe themselves in virtue, like all of us who are disciples; and yet these are not the garments with which our Lord clothed himself. Because in the scripture we learn a few things about his clothing; that He was wrapped in swaddling clothes, and that he was clothed with a shroud, and that he clothed himself with one other thing.

He was wrapped in swaddling clothes because for our sake and for love of us he became fully human, and showed us what full humanity might mean, and that journey started in vulnerable innocence. He was clothed in a shroud because he died for us and it's because of that shroud that we can be clothed in him in baptism, dying to sin through his death. And all this is the foundation of the Gospel which we preach, and which our Archdeacons believe.

But also he clothed himself with one other thing, as St John tells us: "And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table" - that table, which he had extended - "got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him."

It is the towel that marks the deacon. The wiping away of filth, the wiping away of sweat, the drying of the eyes, it is this ministry that we want to see multiplied, as we multiply our Archdeacons today.

For this reason I have brought a gift for our Archdeacons, one for each of the four, and I have them here. Each in a different colour, and yet each one the same. Able to be rolled up and carried along, for each their own personal gift.

The name of these things when you buy them online is: Perfect Fitness Towel. And they are for you.

Perfection is not the business of Archdeacons but the gift of Christ, the Christ who became poor so that we might be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect.

But fitness is the business of Archdeacons, fitness for purpose, fitness for mission, fitness to be encouraged, blessed, challenged, provoked, celebrated, shaped.

And the towel is the reminder that it is by serving, and washing, and drying, and cleaning, and supporting, that fitness will come as the gift of the poor man who longs to serve us first.

Famously in St John's Gospel the institution of the Eucharist, the meal of Christ, does not appear. Instead we have this story, the story of the towel and the washing of the disciples' feet, and we have Peter insisting that he doesn't need serving, and Peter being told that unless he permits himself to be served he has no part in Christ.

Gordon Wakefield, the profound Methodist theologian and educator, in a wonderful book entitled "The Liturgy of St John", reflects on this action of girding with the towel and washing of the feet and he says "Sacraments will cease in the Kingdom of God; but not this" and then goes on to tell this story:

"A Methodist minister of fifty years since once described a dream he had had. He thought he was a tourist in heaven and wandered into the museum of that Holy City. 'There was some old armour there, much bruised with battle. Many things were conspicuous by their absence. I saw nothing of Alexander [the Great]'s there, nor of Napoleon's. There was no Pope's ring... not even Wesley's seal and keys... I saw a widow's mite and the feather of a little bird. I saw some swaddling clothes, a hammer and three nails, and a few thorns. I saw a bit of fishing net and the broken oar of a boat. I saw a sponge that has once been dipped in vinegar, and a small piece of silver... Whilst I was turning over a common drinking cup that had a very honourable place, I whispered to the attendant, 'Have you not got a towel and basin among your collection?' 'No", he said, 'Not here; you see, they are in constant use.'"

For St John it is the washing of feet that is the eternal moment, as we heard in the Gospel a few moments ago. And the promise he shares is that the risen Jesus will serve us and wash us clean until the end of time.

“If I then your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you ought also to wash one another’s feet.” The ministry of the Archdeacon attracts many jokes: “The crook at the head of the bishop’s staff”, “The minister for drains” - and so on. But what in fact it holds for us is the ministry of the towel; which is the closest we may come to the ministry of the poor Christ, that he will exercise for all eternity. And today we commission these three to begin it.

I shall end by re-shaping a thought of St Paul, who in Romans 14 says this, words often used at a funeral: “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.”

Service and leadership are indistinguishable in Christ. Together as a whole people we walk with him, fed by him, feeding others through him, extending the table of the poor man and the table of the King. We do not serve for ourselves, and we are not served for ourselves. If we serve, we serve the Lord, and if we are served, we are served by the Lord; so then whether we serve or are served, we are the Lord’s.

Jennifer, Pete, Roger and Ricky, yours is a ministry that makes that visible, daily. May God bless you in it with a constant renewing of the spirit of Jesus, your lord, who did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. Show us all what that can mean.