

Sunday 29 June 2008
Peter the Apostle
1 Peter 2: 19-end Matthew 16: 13-19

The Reverend Dr Sue Woan — Ordination of Deacons

“Here they are – 13 nearly deacons, all white and looking positively cherubic, their grins revealing both excitement and a certain amount of terror!

What a great day!

Could I ask you, as you take your new deacon home with you, please to unwrap them carefully? Some of them are still bruised. (Not from some secret initiation ritual we have been indulging in while on retreat at Hemingford Grey – rest assured Bishop Nigel) but because they have been pinching themselves and checking that this is really happening.

Some of you, quite properly, will wonder what we’ve been doing these last few days. Well, we’ve been on a journey, revisiting some important memories, truths and marker points in preparation for today and for the years to come.

There have been times of silence, of prayer, of laughter, of crying. Time to think, to study the scriptures and to learn from each other.

And at the start of that journey we thanked God for you and for your ministry – for all of you. Friends, families, neighbours, colleagues, parishioners. You who have supported them over these years of training and often for a lot longer.

Thank you for all the love, the sacrifices of time and resources, the readjustment of family life, coping with times of joy, times of self doubt, frustration with assignments and (for some) the dislocation of a physical move. I particularly want to thank the children who have supported Mum or Dad and have shared them with the rest of us, when you would rather have had them to yourself.

Then we went on to consider the great tradition into which they are to be ordained – the sweep of history and the pattern of deacons, priests and bishops. We have sought to rediscover something of both the awe and the joy of many kinds of worship.

So, here they are – by the end of this service – newly ordained deacons.

But what do you do with them?

As with any new toy or “gizmo” the first thing you ask is “WHAT CAN IT DO?”

Well, I can tell you that they can do plenty – these are special people indeed talented, caring, well-read and eager to get going in the parishes in collaborative ministry (was that OK?)

But while all this is actually true there is a far more important question about WHO THEY ARE.

For you have before you your very own ὑπογραμμός (hypogrammos).
Let me explain:-Can you remember how you learned to write?

Perhaps in Infant or Nursery school, perhaps at home – your first stumbling efforts to make those scratches on paper that the adults seemed to think were so important? I was always glad I had a short name – we did have a Philippa-Louise in our class.....!

In Ancient Greece they did things a little differently.

The boys (sorry girls!) learned to write using wax tablets and with stick-like styluses instead of pencils.

The teacher drew parallel lines and then inscribed a line of writing at the top for the boys to copy. It might be a moral maxim or, more often, a nonsense sentence using all the letters of the Greek alphabet: something like, “All the fire extinguishers are at the back of the auditorium”

Initially, the results might be terrible so the master would urge each boy to trace his stylus in the grooves of the original at the top of the tablet and get the shape imprinted in his mind. At times he would go further; the master would gently place his hand over the hand of his student and gently guide the boy’s hand so that he stayed within the grooves. Not just **giving** him the example but helping him to **fulfill** it.

This is the huppogrammos – the perfect example- the word that Peter used in his letter when he wrote “He[Jesus] left you an example so that you should follow in his (That is Jesus’) steps”.

I have a lot of time for Peter, a real mixture of bravery and cowardice, at times full of incredible insight, while at others suffering from “foot-in-mouth” disease. At times Jesus called him Simon, at better times he called him Peter!

In our Gospel Reading he got it right. In a moment of utter clarity he knew – he absolutely knew, that Jesus was more than just a good man, more than a rabbi, more than a prophet, he was – and is, the Son of God.

Later on, in writing a letter to a group of people undergoing a mixture of very difficult circumstances because of their faith he used this word for “example” huppogrammos, to remind his readers that Jesus was not only one who laid down some good ideas for moral living and then left us to do our best.

For an example, however good, is not enough. For years we have seen birds flying ...yet fail to fly.

A tennis player may watch Wimbledon and be left with nothing more than a desire to burn their rackets.

No, by his death on the cross, by his glorious resurrection, by the sending of the Holy Spirit, God in Jesus, did more than give us a good example – he himself takes our hand, helps us to become what we are truly destined to be, by letting Christ **BE FORMED IN US**.

In ordination these people, with all their flaws and imperfections yet full of amazing potential – become for the church further witnesses to the truth that Peter acknowledged that day. These are our new diocesan huppogrammoi - examples of what Jesus wants to do in and for each of us, for the sake of his world.

For ordination, in many senses, is not a spectator sport. Of course Jesus does not call all of us to ordination but he does call all of us to ministry – to be examples, to be **beacons** (if not necessarily deacons)

Beacons of love and selflessness in a selfish world

Beacons to the power of God in a power hungry world.

Beacons of collaboration in an individualistic society.

Beacons of hope for sad and empty lives.

Beacons of truth in a world where the idea of absolute truth is abhorrent.

Beacons of what God has done and can do if we will let him.

This is what these 13, along with all God's people, are called ...

TO BE

I will leave the Bishop to describe, in the next part of our service, what they will ...

DO

Amen.