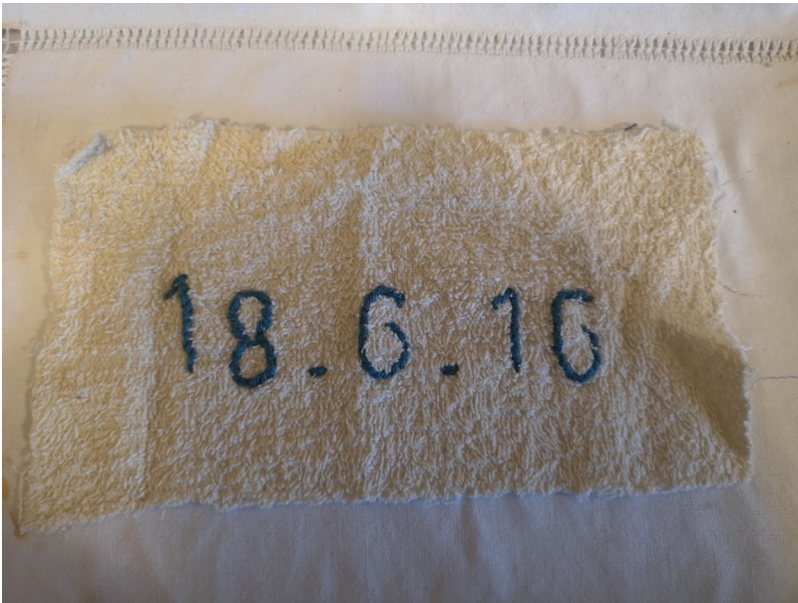


TFTD L20: Deacon ministry

Many thanks to Robin for today's TFTD on Mark 10.42-45



Before I was ordained priest, I went on a retreat at Foxhill with all the other curates in Chester Diocese who had served as deacons for a year and were now to be ordained priest. I have forgotten the name of the woman who led our retreat, but she was very good.

One of the things she spoke to us about was the fact that, although we were about to be ordained priest, we would still be deacons as we had been ordained as deacons the previous year. Our ministry as deacons would continue. And what she emphasised about being a deacon was that deacons were servants; deacons were called to serve others.

And to help us make sure that we never forgot our deacon ministry, she presented us each with a piece of towelling with the date of our ordination as priest embroidered onto it. She told us to put this piece of towelling into our cassock pocket. The towelling would recall that Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and said, 'I have set you an example, that you should also do as I have done to you'.

My piece of towelling has remained in my cassock pocket ever since. I don't use my cassock pocket for anything else and so generally, if my hand slides into my cassock pocket it is by accident rather than by design. Usually my hand is trying to find my trouser pocket to find the vestry keys or a car key or to check that my mobile phone is on silent.

In our church it is our custom for the priests to wear white albs for most services so actually I most commonly wear my cassock for funeral services. So it is just before or just after a funeral service that my hand most commonly closes around my piece of towelling and I am reminded once again, in the middle of a last minute check for my car keys, that I am called to be a servant. And so my focus is re-directed to those I am called to serve in that moment, to those who mourn who must be comforted.

We all have certain expectations of our leaders. We expect leaders to be decisive. We expect them to know what to do and tell everybody what they should do. Along with that comes certain styles of talking and certain ways of behaving. And a certain capacity for ignoring things that other people say.

Servants are not like that. Psalm 123 verse 2 reads: 'As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, until he has mercy upon us.' Servants are watchful. They wait for others to take the initiative. They wait until they know how it is they can serve. They stand and wait.

When I first became a vicar, I was struck by how often people would ask me to tell them how we were going to do things. They yearned for me to make a decision. But I was still watching and waiting, trying to understand how I might be able to serve.

Sometimes I feel that way about our bishops. Why won't they hurry up and make a decision? (As long as it's the one I think they should make, of course.) But our bishops were ordained first as deacons. They are also servants; servants of our Lord and also our servants. So maybe they are watching and waiting to see how they might serve.

All the worst things that have happened in churches have happened, at least in part it seems to me, because church leaders forgot they were servants. So let's reflect a little on how we need to make time and space for our leaders to exercise servant leadership. Let us be ready to challenge all the ways in which we carry into church assumptions about how leadership is exercised which do not come from the example of Jesus Christ, who once said;

'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your

servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.' (Mark 10: 42-45)

Robin Pye,
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