

Diaconate Ordination, 2009

“If you came this way,/Taking any route, starting from anywhere,/At any time or at any season/You are here to kneel/Where prayer has been valid./And prayer is more/Than an order of words, the conscious occupation/of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.”

Take a moment, if you will, and, in your mind’s eye, travel this route back in time with me some 385 years to a small village in England.

The town is abuzz with the news of an odd procession of folks who have just passed through, on their way to a derelict local manor. The rumor is that the party, consisting of an elderly widow, her two sons, their families and retainers are doing something odd indeed—and the rumor is true. For Mary Ferrar, together with her two sons: the older, John, a failed speculator; the younger, Nicholas, a vocational deacon, is embarking on an exhilarating, odd, wildly romantic venture that will be remembered as one of Anglicanism’s finest moments.

The Ferrar’s have been stung badly by the failure of the Virginia Company and its holding in North America. Seeking a fresh start and a new way of life, they have moved from London to this ruined manor to found a community. And that, my dear ordinands, is precisely what they do.

Because worship of God is the most important thing in Christian life, they restore the church, long used as a barn, before anything else. And gradually, their lives take on a remarkable rhythm. Led by the permanent deacon Nicholas, the household, now numbering around 40, pray the canonical Offices in common each day. Because they see prayer as so important, as you can still see today, they place the prayer desk at the same height as the pulpit, a visual symbol of its equality with Scripture. They begin a school for local children and an infirmary to serve the poor and elderly. And, because knowledge of the Bible is so important, they create, literally by cutting and pasting, a continual narrative of the Old and New Testaments, a narrative so well received that copies find their way into the hands of the poet George Herbert, and the King, Charles I.

Under the leadership of Deacon Nicholas, the Ferrars create the community of Little Gidding, an embodiment of the diaconal ministry upon which you embark today, a witness to the power of unconditional, open-handed response to the Living God’s call to service.

Our Scripture today speaks to us of such call. In the reading from Jeremiah, we hear the call of the prophet. In spite of his youth and inexperience, God assures Jeremiah that He will be with him, for God has put His words into Jeremiah's mouth. Despite his fear and hesitation, despite his reluctance, Jeremiah is called into the ministry of service, and has only one real option, that of unconditional response, no matter what the price.

How this ministry is to be enacted is made clear in the gospel from Luke. Only the ones content with the most insignificant roles, Jesus says, will have true power. Only the ones who serve genuinely will follow in His footsteps.

And to find the concrete elements of how your own deaconal ministries should find expression, you have only to look at those of your predecessor, Nicholas Ferrar. As his life—and the life of the community he led—was rooted in daily prayer, so must yours be. Because the deacon is not simply a social worker in a colorful sash. Rather, his or her ministry necessarily must be grounded in continual prayer, in an ever-developing relationship with Jesus so that, as Paul so lavishly reminds us in our Epistle, we indeed may experience that “God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

As Nicholas and the Little Gidding community were called to draw people to the knowledge and love of Jesus by their ministries of teaching, healing, and service, so are all of you. The concrete expression of your call needs at least as much to be service at the tables of the poor as at the table of the Lord, as much in the care of God's little ones as in the care of the great and the good.

And, like Ferrar, you need to have a passion for teaching folks about Jesus, from the littlest ones in Sunday School to the Lawyer who queries you at Forum on Sunday morning. And this isn't nearly as much about information as about personal experience of Jesus of Nazareth, dead, risen, and living in the Church today in ways so real that we can reach out and touch them.

If you root yourselves in prayer, if you dedicate yourselves to the service of God's littlest ones, if you teach about Jesus with passion and conviction, I can tell you with the absolute confidence borne of experience that your ministry will bear fruit wildly out of proportion to your efforts.

Nicholas Ferrar died in 1637. Ten years later, the Puritans, declaring Little Gidding a nest of “crypto-Papism,” drove the community into exile, and destroyed the church’s furnishings.

But, like all true deaconal ministry, that was not the end, but only the beginning. For Little Gidding provides a testimony to the power of true service ministry that continues to this day. Witness, for example, the many years of deaconal service lived in community by our Assisting Bishop, Bill Frey, and his wife. Witness the founding of communities from Ukraine to contemporary England with Little Gidding as their model. Witness the ongoing conversion to lives of Christian service of individuals like the poet T.S. Eliot, who named one of his *Four Quartets* “Little Gidding” to commemorate his own epiphany there.

For each of you: Anne, Diane, Don, Jan, and Ruth, is today beginning the same Journey, the same high adventure, that your predecessor Nicholas began some 385 years ago. Like him, you are being called to enter into a special form of the reality to which all Christians are called, the reality that service grounded in the mystery of Jesus knows no absolute limits, faces no impossible challenges, and extends itself beyond the farthest horizons you could ever imagine.

“And all shall be well and/All manner of thing shall be well/By the purification of the motive/In the ground of our beseeching.” Amen.