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# Your Servants for Jesus' Sake

ROBIN NIXON

*A sermon preached at the Ordination Service  
in Southwell Minster on 2 July 1978*

The ordination here today of nine men to the priesthood and six men to the diaconate, and the admission of one woman to the order of deaconess, is obviously enough a major occasion in their lives; but it is also an important event in the lives of many other people. I was ordained priest just twenty years ago last month. I remember well the two ordination retreats and the charges of the then Archbishop of York, Dr Michael Ramsey, but I must confess that I have completely forgotten the two ordination sermons. My most vivid memory is of a candidate in a dilapidated pair of shoes who was in real danger of losing his sole on his ordination day! So I can hardly expect that our ordinands today, feasted on spiritual strawberries and cream at their ordination retreat, will find the plums and custard which I provide so tasty or so memorable. There are features in an ordination service which are akin to a baptism, a wedding and even a funeral. And just as on those occasions the subject of the rite is usually either physically or emotionally incapable of hearing and understanding the address, but the preacher hopes that the congregation will do so, so today I shall have the congregation especially in mind while hoping that there may be the odd plumstone which the ordinands may pick up and which one day may grow up into a fruitful tree.

What then does the ordination of these men here today mean to you? To parents and families: is it the fulfilment of an ambition?—a noble sacrifice to do good to others?—the waste of a promising life and a likely long-term drain on the family bank balance?

To parishioners: is it a new deaconess or deacon or priest to admire?—to lean on?—to fall in love with?—to project your problems and frustrations on to?

To regard these candidates in some of these ways may have some little truth, but they are all inadequate and some are plain wrong. For St Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:5, 'What we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves your servant for Jesus' sake.'

'What we preach is not ourselves'. There are many temptations to do just that in the Christian ministry. Even in those parishes which have taken lay ministry most seriously, the clergy have still virtually

the key role. If they cannot singlehandedly promote new life in a congregation they can almost singlehandedly stop it! It is easy for clergy to talk of 'I' and 'my' in contexts where 'we' and 'our' would be not only more humble but more accurate and more theological. It is easy to be ambitious for success and to go with pride to gatherings of clergy, waiting to slip in a 'modest' word (of course) about a full church and flourishing activities or to say that 'great things are happening'. While these may in one sense be marks of success, in another sense they may only reflect the social class of the parish. Certainly God wants our ministry to be fruitful but we must all realize that the fruit will take different forms in different places. I went to my curacy hoping to promote a spiritual revolution in the parish. In most areas I failed. But I learnt that it is not a case of preaching *ourselves* or, even more important, of trusting ourselves, but of trusting *God*. Since then, when I have been in situations of growth I have been aware (at last at more than merely head level) of being caught up in the work and will of God which are, far, far greater than my own puny efforts. Do not think of these men and this woman in the spirit of 'Didn't he do well?'. Think of them rather obeying the calling of God and trusting in the faithfulness of God.

The words of principals are not always remembered by their students but I recall my own principal saying that the ranks of the ministry were full of men made bitter through failure or pompous through success. These candidates will all have to go through times of failure which will be the real test of their faith and can be one of the greatest means of spiritual growth. We may, of course, preach ourselves in self pity. Look at me—a modern martyr! Here I am, sacrificing myself and my family and *they* won't respond. (When clergy start speaking of their parishioners as 'they', it is normally time for them to move on!) Many such situations occur because our vision of God's work is not large enough or flexible enough. My impression is, however, that the changes of the last twenty years have largely released the clergy from their burden of guilt about those who do not attend church. We have learnt to face reality and we thank God for those who come. We have a more committed church life. But we must all remember the responsibilities and opportunities of the Church of England in the whole of society and not lapse into a cosy sectarianism. Jesus calls us all to mission in his name.

Paul knew what the problems of ministry were, and in the passage from which our text is drawn he says: 'We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed.' He has managed to set things in a divine perspective and to see that 'this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison'—a text which used to come to me as I reclined in a dentist's chair which provided a magnificent view of Durham

Cathedral! But he reminds the people that 'we have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.' Those who are ordained are probably beginning to know themselves as earthen vessels. But do their parishioners see them as such? You need to be realistic about the clergy and their needs—material, emotional and spiritual—and to realize that they need you to minister to them. Proper expenses are essential, and an invitation to a meal or a word of encouragement may be very important to them. You can provide a pastoral care which supplements that of the incumbent and of the diocese.

Let us not forget the wives of those who are being ordained. They must be seen first of all as Christian people in their own right, then as wives of the men they married (and see from time to time!) and mothers of their children, and only thirdly as curates' wives, playing whatever part in the parish is appropriate to their calling, gifts and circumstances. A changed understanding of the role of women in society does not bypass the wives of clergy. Let your expectations of them take account of their emotional needs and the economic pressures on clergy families of which the wives so often have to bear the brunt.

'What we preach is not ourselves', whether in apparent success or apparent failure, for we have this treasure in earthen vessels. We do however have something, or rather someone, to preach—Jesus Christ as Lord. It is said that a nineteenth-century sermon-taster went to hear two well-known free church preachers in London. After hearing Parker in the morning he commented 'What a wonderful preacher!'; after hearing Spurgeon in the evening 'What a wonderful Saviour!' If there are earthen vessels there is also treasure—Jesus Christ as Lord. There is something to preach! Yet we easily let our sermons be neglected or even derided. A lack of seriousness by clergy and laity about preaching is a lack of seriousness about Christ and will show itself in other aspects of church life and ministry, including the sacraments. People, even in the church, can easily treat religion as an escape from the harshness of the real world to the comfortable platitudes of an unreal world. I have been increasingly impressed in my own spiritual understanding and experience over recent weeks by the sheer reality of the Christian gospel. It talks about Jesus Christ the Son of God who really lived, died and rose again. It talks about the real human situation of sin, failure, sorrow and death. It reaches us where we really are, as what we really are, instead of what our fantasies and our physical and mental drugs make us believe. Our response to it makes a real relationship with Jesus Christ which lasts when everything else crumbles. Someone stuck on my study door, before I came to the college, a sticker which says 'Jesus is alive today'. That is to me a daily reminder of what is more real than anything else.

Our ordinands are called to a ministry of word and deed. One of the church's problems over recent years has been that the state has taken over so many of its 'deeds' and it seems that it is only left with 'words'. Yet there are still countless deeds of love to be performed in our welfare state by those who know the love of Christ. There is always, too, the need of the word of interpretation which shows how God is the giver of all good things; and of the word of proclamation which sets forth Jesus Christ as Lord and as the only one truly able to provide for our welfare at the deepest level. Parents and friends will never understand these ordinands, the vessels, unless they know what the treasure is—Jesus Christ. Congregations will misuse the vessels unless they understand that they are only there to carry the treasure.

'What we preach is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord with ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake.' 'Deacon' and 'minister' are words meaning 'servant'. How do you treat the servants? By giving them all the chores? Everyone must do some tedious routine things in his job but the clergy are peculiarly susceptible to taking on things which they ought never to do by their gifts, their calling, their training or their office in the church. They are not just your servants, but your servants *for Jesus' sake*.

Who is responsible for the work of the gospel in a place? Older patterns in practice suggested that it was the clergy, and that the laity were there to help them. Many are now coming to see that this is not the right starting place. We should think of the people of God in a parish as being responsible to him for doing his work in that place: yes, the congregation knowing that the Christian life, worship and witness is their business—in one sense it depends on them. They then may have a priest, full time or part time, to help them to fulfil their responsibilities. Basically he is there to help them and only secondarily will they help him. Such an attitude can transform church life. A country parish which joined in a college mission recently has just lost its rector. The lay people didn't sit back. They accepted their responsibility to keep things going. But they said, 'We really do need someone to come and help us and teach us.' This move from dependence on the clergy to a proper partnership with them bodes well for the future if the right sort of help can be given. The clergy, of course, are sent by the bishop as representatives of the catholic church and they have a responsibility in that direction, but they are your servants for Jesus' sake.

'For Jesus' sake', 'for Jesus' sake', because of all that he means to them: the one who lived, died and rose again, motivating and enabling, saving and leading. These ordinands have come here today not for status, nor for power, certainly not for wealth, not even for fun, but for Jesus' sake. Because of that, their service to you is a high calling and a great privilege and joy, not a waste but a fulfilment.

The mainspring of their ministries is not a sense of sacrifice, nor an attempt to be do-gooders, but gratitude to God for all that he has done in Christ and a desire to share that with you.

If you can thus understand what motivates these men and this woman, if you can understand the reality of God, the reality of the gospel and the reality of the ministry, then this ordination will be a great blessing to you. You who are parents may have lost a son but you will have gained a heavenly father and with him your son in a far deeper way. You who are parishioners will have gained a servant and with him also a gracious master. For 'what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake.'

**ROBIN NIXON** is Principal of St John's College, Nottingham and Consultant Editor of *Churchman*. The sermon is printed here exactly as it was delivered.

## Attention Please

- Many articles are printed in *Churchman* with the intention of provoking debate. The editors will gladly consider correspondence in connection with them, or articles in reply, though no guarantee of publication can be made. Normally, *Churchman* goes to press about two months before publication, so that contributions need to be received before the end of January, April, July and October to have any chance of being printed in the next issue.
- The Secretary of the EFAC (Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion) Literature Fund has asked us to thank all those who responded to the 1978 appeal for help in meeting the cost of sending *Churchman* to evangelical leaders in developing countries. There was a generous response, which has enabled the Fund to cover all the subscriptions for which it is responsible.

### **The ordination of women**

As the General Synod of the Church of England moves towards a decision on this subject at its session in November 1978, three articles from different viewpoints are offered in this issue to help clarify the complexities of the subject.