



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

A new deacon - 7th Sunday of Easter Year C

Readings: Acts 7:55-60, Ps 97, Revelation 22:12-14,16-17,20, John 17:20-26

In a matter of a few short weeks the parish of Bodmin and its four mission station churches will, once again, have a deacon. On 12th July at Noon Rafael will be ordained in the parish church, the culmination of four years of study and a lifetime of prayerful service in the Universal Church.

Raf is a hugely experienced and much travelled man, holding senior positions in a number of international companies and church organisations, about which he is always gently self-deprecatory and touchingly humble. For this opportunity we give thanks to God. It is therefore, given the lection for today around the martyrdom of Saint Stephen, one of the first men to be ordained deacon, worth reminding ourselves of what the ministry of a Deacon is.

For centuries the Latin church allowed the order to effectively lapse except as a late and all too brief staging post to priesthood, a kind of ceremonial liturgical rite of passage to 'the real thing' – priesthood. But that is not how Holy Scripture records it nor represents it. When, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, it began to be taken seriously again, it became for many a way of offering and exercising ministry to which they had long felt called but for which there seemed no appropriate provision or opportunity. For a few it seemed too often to be a retirement hobby that afforded a desirable bit of parochial, even diocesan status. Let me concentrate on the many – and the origin of their ministry among us.

We begin with St Stephen, whose pioneering ministry is celebrated the day after the Nativity of Christ and is thus largely lost to the faithful, beached on the sofa in a gastronomic coma. The origin of the Diaconal ministry is simple. The name means – servant. The order was created by the Apostles out of a purely practical need. The rapid, nay spectacular post Pentecost growth of the nascent Church had thrown up enormous opportunities as well as intensely practical problems. The attraction of a moral group with Messianic expectations and a welfare system that pledged sharing of resources and economic security was enormous. The Apostles thus found themselves, hindered in their work of preaching, teaching, catechising, leading, and missioning by the sudden unlooked for burden of practical care of the poor of the community. To put it bluntly, they were waiting on tables rather than waiting on God.

The Order of Deacon, and an order it is, was created to serve the community in the common life and take this practical burden off the shoulders of the Apostles. The original seven – chosen as the number of divine perfection rather than the apostolic mirror of the twelve tribes of Israel – were ordained, as Raf will be, by the Apostolic laying on of hands. The Deacon was to have a particular ministry of organisation, discernment of need and distribution to the poor. (The Prayer Book liturgy of the Church of England retains a note of this original intention in its rubric for the Offertory, noting that the Deacon (and or Churchwardens – another incredibly useful office that the Universal Church has, to its considerable cost, also forgotten -) shall go round with ‘a decent bason’ to collect alms for the poor.

But the ministry of Deacon expands almost immediately from its creation, not least by the remarkable, albeit brief, work of St. Stephen. We know that, in addition to the public charitable work and practical ministry in the community, the Deacon takes his place in the sanctuary and fulfils a liturgical function. This comes, not only from the doctrinal link between the beliefs and the work of the Church, the physical and the spiritual inextricably linked in an incarnational church which preaches the Risen body, but also from Stephen’s example.

We see from the extensive and detailed record of Stephen’s trial and execution, that here is a man authorised to give public testimony and, if need be, to engage the current worldly authorities in debate and hold them to account. This requires courage, conviction and, while caring for his community, nevertheless a personal carelessness of consequence.

He is also then, internally to the community and externally in the mission field, a preacher. Hence liturgically he can both proclaim the Holy Gospel and preach. We see recorded that Stephen was full of wisdom and a performer of both healings and

miracles. This is not required of a deacon but it is always a welcome extra! And, where a deacon's wisdom falls short, he relies, like the priest on the divine wisdom of God.

We are also clear from the texts of Acts 6 and 7 that Stephen both knows and understands the Holy Scriptures and the Word of God in Christ – that is to say, the whole history of salvation and the grace of God. This should also be the hallmark of a Deacon.

Finally, though there is truly much more, a Deacon is a martyr. He is called to bear witness. The upshot of that witness may be to see men repent. It may be to be jeered and mocked. It may be to be persecuted. It may cost him his life. It may be to have the next St Paul witness his unshakeable faith and witness and who will hear, years later, that voice on the Damascus Road emanating from the blinding light, that changes the history of Man.

In short – a Deacon is not a liturgical decoration who encourages you to shake hands halfway through the Mass and tells you to go home at the end of it. Deaconing is not for cissies. It is a real and ancient and powerful ministry both within and without the Church and we need to pray more men and more younger men into offering themselves for this charitable and challenging and missionary Order.

And pray for Raf and for Dawn, his wife who has been such a vital and encouraging part of the journey.