

Petertide 2015: 28th June 2015

John 21: 15 – 22

When the Priory's Licensed Reader, Jean, preached this morning she began by holding up a two pound coin. Such is the impecuniosity of the Rector, I've got a ten pence piece! But I wonder: if I tossed it, just put your hand up if you think it will come down tails up. Well you're wrong, he says with the confidence of the man who's standing six feet above contradiction and has a two headed coin! I haven't got a two headed coin, actually, but the point is that sometimes you've just got to make a decision and say what's going to happen. And today's been a bit like that.

The 29th June is the feast day of St.Peter and St.Paul. and the Church of England – for once not behind history but ahead of the game in devolving decision making to the grass roots – gives us the option of celebrating St.Peter and St.Paul, or just St.Peter on his own. And how we exercise that option determines

which readings get set. So, with all the confidence of a man who stands six feet above contradiction, I decided we're having St.Peter.

I suppose it's a bit of a shame to side-line St.Paul altogether; and I know we are going to have a nod in his direction in the intercessions. After all he is, for better or worse, probably more responsible than anybody else for the formation and shape of the church – not of the faith; but of the church. Our Lord himself is, of course, the cornerstone of our faith, even if Christians sometimes talk as if St.Paul trumps him. Nevertheless it is St.Paul more than anyone who influenced the institutionalisation of the faith that is based on Jesus.

The reason I plumped for St.Peter, though is that next Sunday the Priory's new curate, Christine Strand, is ordained in York Minster; and our whole understanding of priesthood stems from St.Peter: from Jesus' instruction to Peter we've just read in

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St. John's Gospel that he is to be the shepherd of Christ's flock; and from the authority conferred him by Jesus (which we read this morning in St. Matthew's Gospel) that what St. Peter binds on earth is bound in heaven and what he loosed on earth is loosed in heaven.

The idea is that that responsibility and that authority have passed down the line through the laying on of hands at ordination from St. Peter to each successive generation of priests down to the present. It means that priests have magic hands. If I wave these hands at you and declare God has forgiven you, then God has forgiven you because I say so. If I wave these hands at you and declare God's blessing, God has blessed you, because I say so. Perhaps more importantly, if I wave these hands over the bread and the wine of Holy Communion and say they are to us the body and blood of Christ, that is what they have become, because I say so.

Of course, these hands don't actually contain any magic power. It's not a conjuring trick, as if I say "Bread, wine, abracadabra, body and blood of Jesus." Priestly authority only exists in the context of us gathering as the body of Christ. Priestly authority is shared by us all and is only seen in individual Priests in the way that light is seen after it has passed through a prism. Individually ordained Priests only have authority in the sense that they are the prism through which the priesthood of all believers is seen.

Now, all this is all very well and good, but next week, when Christine is ordained, she won't be ordained a priest: she will be ordained deacon. All else being equal, we assume she will be ordained priest next year at Petertide after she has served as deacon for a year.

And that's what a deacon is all about: service, caring for the poor, the needy, the sick and all who are in trouble. The Church of England is increasingly recognising that some people have a vocation to be

distinctive deacons. For them, being a deacon is about more than probationary year before becoming a priest. Distinctive deacons are called to full time ministry, but not to leadership within the church. They will often work within the church, but looking outwards as evangelists or living out the gospel in social projects.

Christine, though, is being trained to be a priest and her year of being exclusively a deacon is part of that formation. But when she is ordained priest, next Petertide, she will not cease to be a deacon. Priesthood doesn't replace being a deacon; it simply adds on to it. I'm a deacon. Alison White, to be consecrated Bishop of Hull on Friday, is a deacon. The Archbishop of York is a deacon. The enduring characteristics of being a deacon are what keep priests' feet on the ground, or they're meant to. They are what counterbalance all this talk of authority and responsibility which, if unchecked, can distort the personality; because the role of the Priest is to combine the exercise of priestly

authority with the servanthood of the Deacon. This means that no amount of carrying chairs or lifting tables or putting out the bins should be beneath any Priest's dignity.

So in practice Christine's ordained ministry during this next year, after she has been ordained deacon but before she is ordained priest, shouldn't be that different to the rest of her ordained ministry, except in the conduct of worship. She won't absolve us of our sins, she won't bless us, she won't preside as we celebrate the Eucharist together. We she will, though, be growing into that role which our Lord conferred upon St. Peter of feeding us, the sheep of his flock.

And so we pray for Christine as she goes into retreat to prepare for ordination, as she is ordained next Sunday and as she begins her ministry among us. Our prayer is a prayer of commitment to support and assist her; and for the grace to receive the spiritual sustenance she offers. Amen.