

Ordination of Jonathan Middleton

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[0 : 00] you who are known to be full of the spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. Also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.

They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly and a number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Thank you, Rachel. Thank you, Michael. It's a great joy to be amongst you this evening for this special occasion. I promise that I don't often wear this kit either. As you can see, I'm not very good at handling myself when I'm in it. In fact, there's one piece that I've never worn before, but I'll not take you through all the kit. Well, what is going on this evening as Jonathan is about to be admitted into what we call the diaconate, which is the kind of collective noun for the ministry of a deacon in the church of God. What are we doing? What is all this that is being said and why? Well, it's my prayer that at least some of these things will become clear to us as I preach from one of the two set texts from the service of the making of deacons. The other one is in 1 Timothy chapter 3 in verses 8 to 13. But you might like to have what Rachel has just read open in front of you. It's Acts chapter 6 and it's on page 1098 in the church Bibles. It's been said that the office of deacon is the least understood and most overlooked of the threefold order of the Anglican church, being seen merely as a stepping stone to greater things like becoming a presbyter.

But indeed it is, so all those who do become presbyters do have to be deacons first, and bishops must also follow that. And indeed we all remain deacons whatever order we occupy. So Martin, wherever he is, is there, Martin is a presbyter in the church of God, but he remains a deacon, which is what he was ordained as. I as a bishop am a presbyter, but I also remain a deacon. So it's worth looking now at what is involved. It's also worth saying that the terms used in the New Testament seem pretty fluid, and so it's wise to have that in mind as we go forward. So for example, the word deacon occurs in a number of places. So in Paul's letter to the Philippians, he addresses that letter to all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons. In Romans chapter 16, Paul goes on to say, I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church. In the other set text for this service, 1 Timothy chapter 3, Paul again speaks of deacons and underlines the character required of them. Yet there is considerable overlap of these requirements with those of the overseers and bishops, which he talks about in the early part of chapter 3.

Interestingly, it doesn't specify, for example, in 1 Timothy 3, that deacons should be able to teach, whereas overseers must be able to teach. Well, all this seems really quite distinct, doesn't it, from the seven men that we have that are in our passage in Acts 6. They were selected to help the apostles with the distribution of food, but certainly some of them exercise very significant teaching roles later in the chapters of Acts, not least Stephen, who was mentioned in the prayer that Michael read out, who takes such a significant role in the next chapter.

And indeed, his teaching, his preaching, his proclamation is what leads to his own death and martyrdom.

[5 : 23] Well, also in our passage, as I said, is one of the two set passages for the office of the making of deacons. The word deacon doesn't actually appear in Acts chapter 6, at least not in the same sense that we've noted it as I've read from other parts of the New Testament. The word, however, is there in the original in two uses. The first is in verse 2. Look with me. So the twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables. The word waiting on tables is deaconing in the original in its verbal form.

The second reference you'll find if you look on to verses 3 and 4, where they say, we will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. This responsibility, as they refer to it, refers to the waiting on tables that we've just seen, i.e. helping in the food distribution. And this delegation was to enable the apostles, the twelve as they're titled here, to give their attention to prayer and the ministry or the deaconing of the word.

So it seems as though the twelve apostles were deacons of the word and the seven were deacons of the distribution. They're waiting on tables. Although, as I've said, Stephen and Philip and others notably have a significant teaching role. Well, I don't know whether I've thoroughly confused you or not, but from all this, it is fair to say that we would do well to be flexible in our understanding of what deacons, as we now have them, should be doing. The job description is not laid out very clearly in the New Testament, and I believe that is in God's good purposes. Well, we certainly need to pray and to ask God's help. So let's just pray briefly now before I dig in more into our passage.

Father, we ask this evening that in your mercy you will help us, that you will build us up by your Holy Spirit as you speak through your word. We pray that as well as being better informed, we might all see the fruit produced as it was in Acts chapter 6, which finishes with these words.

So the word of God spread, the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

[8 : 23] We pray that you will help us in Jesus' name. Amen. So let's dig in a little bit more into our passage. Acts chapter 6, of course, occurs in the book of Acts, which is Luke's second volume, the first of which is talking about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day that he was taken up to heaven. That's what we're told in the first two verses of Acts chapter 1.

This second book, therefore, tells of what the risen, ascended Lord Jesus continued to do by his Spirit working in and through his word being proclaimed by his people.

Acts finishes in chapter 28 with the Apostle Paul proclaiming that very word, the kingdom of God, and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ. And he did so with all boldness and without hindrance, despite the fact that he was technically under arrest and under guard.

Well, Acts marks a very significant expansion of God's people, including people from every nation, tribe, people, and language. And that is a little microcosm of what we see here this evening at St. Silas.

But now, however, in our passage, there is a threat to the unity which would have undermined the growth that has been seen in Acts 1 to 5. In verse 2, the Hellenistic Jews, among them, complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

[10 : 15] Previously, as we've noted earlier in Acts, anyone gave to anyone according to their need. But now, for whatever reason, some were being overlooked in that distribution, and that led to complaining, verse 1. Now, the word translated complaining there means murmuring or grumbling, and is indicative of something quite serious. You see, we have other examples of that. When the Pharisees and others grumbled at the company that Jesus kept, the laborers in the parable in Matthew 20, who had worked through the heat of the day, grumbled about receiving the same wages as those who had only been hired an hour before the end of the day. The Israelites in the desert, in the Exodus narrative, had grumbled.

And Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10, tells the Corinthians, do not grumble as some of them in the Exodus did, and were killed by the destroying angel. Here, the problem of distribution could have been inadvertent and even justified. But grumbling, complaining, murmuring is always a serious threat to the unity of God's people. It is indicative of dissatisfaction with how God has done things. Well, the serious issue of the distribution, having been identified, the twelve, the apostles, took action, verse 2, to tackle the problem and to ensure that they, the apostles, were not distracted from their Christ-given priority of the word of God. Verse 2. The solution was to delegate the waiting on tables to seven others, whilst they gave attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. Well, what can we learn from this short account? First of all, deacons are servants. Deacons are servants. We have already noted that the word waiting on tables, which is what the seven were to be given responsibility for, comes from the same root word as the word for ministry of the word, which, with prayer, the twelve apostles were to give their attention to. And the root word in both cases gives us our word deacon, diaconate. It is a servant role.

Perhaps the most significant use of that same word is recorded for us in Mark chapter 10, when James and John had been seeking the places of honour at the right hand and at the left of Jesus in

his kingdom.

And when that becomes clear to them, and indeed to the twelve who get indignant, Jesus tells them, you know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, deacon. And whoever wants to be the first must be the slave of all. For even the son of man, though he deserved to be served, did not come to be served, to be deaconed, but to serve.

He came to deacon, to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. When I was ordained as a deacon in Paraguay, in South America, I was given a towel, which I still have, to remind me of the nature of the servant role that I was given. Why was that necessary? Because for some, the granting of a role in leadership becomes an excuse to be puffed up with self-importance. And I saw that in some ordinands whose attitude and demeanour changed the moment that they wore a collar or that they received the reverent title. It happened for me, too, when I was a soldier in the army, that those who'd been through with me through Sandhurst and the seven months of gruelling training, when we got to our units, the temptation was to start ordering everyone around and not actually to serve and to take note of what those who had served for far longer were suggesting. It's always better to think of this role or the role of church leadership as serving others, not the top of a pyramid to which we all climb, but to remember that actually you're going down into leadership to serve the people of God.

[15 : 49] So, if and when the time comes for you to be ordained as a presbyter or an elder, Jonathan, you're going to be going down from where you will be at the end of this evening.

I, when I was made a presbyter, appointed a friend as a pomposity pricker. I told him, whenever I get above myself, you are to jab me and to remind me. Well, there's only one that's lower than a presbyter, and that's a bishop. You wouldn't think so by what you perhaps see or read about, but bishops are servants of the servants of the servants of the servants.

So, deacons, Jonathan, are servants. And like the apostles and indeed other clergy, you will remain a deacon even if on a day you take up a greater teaching prominence. So, that's first.

Deacons are servants. Secondly, you identify potential deacons by reference to the testimony of those who know them. Notice that the apostles did not do the initial choosing of those seven.

They asked the assembly of the people of God to do that. In verse 3, brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. Why?

[17 : 25] Because although the apostles gave the criteria of being full of the Spirit and wisdom, which are the requirements that are brought out more in 1 Timothy chapter 3, they were not necessarily in a position to know the potential candidates. Now, with Jonathan, we have taken references from those who know him, both verbally and in writing. We've spoken to Alice, who knows him quite well.

And he was presented to me by Martin, who serves alongside him. So, actually, this practice, which has been done, is something that will continue as a way of encouragement, but also to provide perhaps early warning if Jonathan goes astray. So, deacons are servants, and deacons are identified by those who know them. Thirdly, and finally, deacons are recognized and affirmed by representatives of the wider Church of God. Last week, I was actually looking to be part of a service in the north of Portugal online when I couldn't find that, but I did find St. Silas. So, I listened in as Martin read out the notices being given that there would be an ordination service this evening which would require the presence of a bishop. Why does it need to be a bishop? Why couldn't Martin, who knows him better than I do, do that for us? Well, whilst Jonathan is being ordained and licensed to serve you here at

St. Silas for the immediate future, there will come a day, sooner or later, when that sphere of service and the people he serves may change. Today, you see, Jonathan is not being ordained into St. Silas.

He's being ordained into the Church of God. And I am present as a representative of that wider body of believers in churches of the Anglican Convocation Europe, in Scotland, in England, in Wales, in Portugal, in Germany, and elsewhere. I'm also representing the Anglican Mission in England churches. We've got one of their ministers here with us this evening. And I also represent Anglican churches around the globe who will recognize this ordination because we have done it this way.

But how is that recognition and affirmation given? In the case of the seven, having been presented by the church to the apostles, the apostles prayed for them and laid their hands on them. Verse 6, the laying on of hands was not an uncommon practice in the Bible, and Timothy had had hands laid on him.

[20 : 33] We have recorded for us in a number of places. 1 Timothy chapter 4 and verse 14, Paul says to him, do not neglect your gift which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Later, in the same letter, he tells Timothy, do not be hasty in the laying on of hands. So he's expecting Timothy to do laying on of hands as well. And in his particular task was that of appointing and recognizing new leadership in the church in Ephesus that had gone off track. And then finally, in the second letter to Timothy, he says more, for this reason, he said, I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. Well, the laying on of hands has two distinct meanings. For one, it indicates the conveying of ministerial authority to serve in this capacity by the duly recognized church authority. And later, I will say these words as I lay hands on Jonathan. Take authority to carry out the office of deacon in the church of God, now committed to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. But secondly, I will present Jonathan with a New Testament and say these words, take authority to read the gospel in the church of God and to serve the Lord. The significance of this is the recognition that it is the Lord who gifts, the gifts that are required for his servants to serve in his church. It's not the bishop who dishes those out. It is the Lord's church. They are the Lord's gifts. And it is the authority of the Lord's word that you will wield in his name. When I was made a bishop, when Ian was made a bishop, the person who consecrated us, who set us apart, hit us both on the head with a Bible to remind us that we're not the authority. We are under God's word, his authority. Well, having asked other witnesses,

I will ask you, do you believe you have been inwardly moved by the Holy Spirit to take upon you this office and ministry for the promoting of his glory and the nurturing of his people?

Well, we need to finish, but I hope this has explained something of the significance of what we're doing today, and not just relevant, of course, to Jonathan, but also to those he will continue to serve. So in conclusion, a deacon is a servant. A deacon's service is identified by witnesses who know him, and it is recognized and affirmed by a representative of the wider church of God. Now, back in 2008, I had the privilege of being in Jerusalem with over a thousand Anglican Christians of all parts of the world. In a very moving moment, we affirmed what we called the Jerusalem Declaration, which was a re-articulation of the biblical roots of Anglicanism in the face of many who were departing and sadly continue to depart to this day. Now, Article 7 of that declaration reads like this, we recognize that God has called and gifted bishops, priests or presbyters and deacons in historic succession to equip all the people of God for their ministry in the world. We uphold the classic Anglican ordinal as an authoritative standard of clerical orders. Now, the Anglican ordinal is that part of the book of common prayer which we're following today in our service, and it's terrific to be able to do this in the place and among the people that Jonathan is serving. In the ordinal, it also says that those who are to be bishops, presbyters and deacons are to be called, tried, examined, and known to have such qualities as are requisite for the same. That's what we're doing tonight. But also by public prayer, that's what we're doing tonight. And with imposition of hands approved and admitted by lawful authority, that is what we're doing tonight. So you have and will witness these elements both in what we have done and what we will be doing. And the role that Jonathan has and will have is both at the same time very demanding and will regularly require the seeking of the Lord's help by Jonathan, by his family, and by his church family. But at the same time, it is the most immense privilege to serve in God's church, God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth, the people bought at the precious price of the blood of God's own Son, as we will remember when we get to the Lord's Supper.

[26 : 17] Father, let's pray. Father, please do your work in our lives by your Spirit, we pray. Now, having preached the Word, and we pray again that you will equip Jonathan for this service. For your name's sake, amen. We're going to stand and remind ourselves now when the music folk come up, we're going to remind ourselves now of who is the real shepherd. I may have a crook, but the one, well, I may be a crook, but...