

“Diakonia Spontaneous, Congregational, Institutional, Political”

To begin our conference with the Blessing of Water and the Renewal of Baptismal Vows is to remind us of our initiation in Christ’s Body and our first call to ministry. “Even though ordained”, writes Susanne Watson Epting, “our primary identity remains baptismal and our ordination charges and vows serve only to expand, enhance, and urge us on in animating and exemplifying the diakonia to which all the baptised were called”.

I have always appreciated the way Deacon Maylaine Maybee speaks of Ordination “I believe orders are signs to the Church of her nature, life and mission. They do not deprive the people of God of their ministry as the priesthood of all believers or the servanthood of all believers. Rather they spotlight that ministry, hold it up, and encourage it to happen.”

All diaconal ministry draws its life and daily work from the heart of Christ himself - Christ the Deacon, Christ who began his public ministry in this way, according to St. Luke.

“¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.””

If we were to use an Indigenous Peoples form of bible study called Gospel Based Discipleship, we would read the text three times and after each one, ask a question.

What word, sentence, idea stands out for you in this Gospel reading?

What is Jesus saying to you?

What is Jesus calling you to do?

As Jesus chose that great Isaiah text as a mantra for the ministry, so the Church must receive it as a mantra for its own. For deacons charged with serving all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, the lonely; and with interpreting to the Church the needs, hopes and concerns of the world, it is particularly poignant.

The Isaiah text speaks to a number of manifestations of diakonia. Lutheran scholar Kjell Nordstokke speaks of four. “ ‘Spontaneous’ diakonia is good work grounded in the ministry of Jesus and the teaching of Luther who said, ‘There is no need for a Christian to invent good work; it comes to us in the form of everyday challenges.’ ‘Organized’ diakonia is represented in the collective efforts of the congregation. “Institutional diakonia” finds expression in hospitals and other societies and agencies that care for those who suffer. ‘Prophetic’ diakonia calls us to political activity. ‘While diakonia begins as unconditional service to the neighbour in need, it leads inevitably to social change that restores, reforms and transforms. ...It is change oriented

and boldly addresses root causes.”⁷ Speaking out of a Latin American context Lutheran pastor Angel Furlan writes, “We understand it is not enough to meet and alleviate immediate and distressing needs, it is necessary to look also at the structures that produce them and that are responsible for the poverty, exclusion, and death like situations. ...We are called to tackle the root causes not just to apply palliatives to their effects...to enter the realm of political diakonia implies continuing the work of many to relive suffering, to denounce its causes, and do everything in our power so that what produces an perpetuates it is changed.”⁸

As Anglicans world-wide embrace the commonly held five Marks of Mission, deacons are particularly engaged in provided spirited leadership for the churches commitment to marks three, four and five.

- To respond to human need by loving service.
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind, and to pursue peace and reconciliation.
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth... .

Honouring these marks of mission requires all manifestations of diakonia – spontaneous, congregational, institutional, political.

It seems to me that this fulsome view of diakonia is at the very center of the current Pope’s teaching, reflected in his first Apostolic Exhortation – “*Evangelii Gaudium*” The Joy of the Gospel – to the bishops, clergy, consecrated persons and the lay faithful “on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World”.

With a deep personal integrity and authenticity of character as the Vicar of Christ, Francis is teaching much about “the social dimension of evangelization” pointing out that at the very heart of the Gospel is life in community and engagement with others. “Our redemption” he writes, “has a social dimension because God in Christ redeems not only the individual person, but also the social relations existing between people”. Our response to a just and loving God can’t just be seen as an accumulation of small personal gestures to individuals in need, a kind of “charity a la carte”, or a series of acts aimed solely at easing our conscience. The Gospel is about the kingdom of God – a loving God who reigns in our world. To the extent that God reigns within us, the life of society will be a setting for universal fraternity, justice, peace and dignity for all people”.

Francis is calling the Church to listen and hear afresh God’s regard for the poor. “197. God’s heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself ‘became poor’ (*2 Cor 8:9*). The entire history of our redemption is marked by the presence of the poor. Salvation came to us from the ‘yes’ uttered by a lowly maiden from a small town on the fringes of a great empire. The Saviour was born in a manger, in the midst of animals, like children of poor families; he was presented at the Temple along with two turtledoves, the offering made by those who could not afford a lamb (*cf. Lk 2:24; Lev 5:7*); he was raised in a home of ordinary workers and worked with his own hands to earn his bread. When he began to preach the Kingdom, crowds of the dispossessed followed him, illustrating his words: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor’ (*Lk 4:18*). He assured those

burdened by sorrow and crushed by poverty that God has a special place for them in his heart: 'blessed are you poor, yours is the kingdom of God' (Lk 6:20); he made himself one of them: 'I was hungry and you gave me food to eat', and he taught them that mercy towards all of these is the key to heaven (*cf. Mt 25:5ff*).

198. For the church, the option for the poor is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one. God shows the poor 'his first mercy'.¹⁶³ This divine preference has consequences for the faith life of all Christians, since we are called to have 'this mind...which was in Jesus Christ'. (*Phil 2:5*)"

On the matter of wealth the Pope speaks with absolute clarity,

"No! to the new idolatry of money."

"No! to our economy of exclusion."

"No! to a financial system which rules rather than serves."

"202. The need to resolve the structural causes of poverty cannot be delayed, not only for the pragmatic reason of its urgency for the good order of society, but because society needs to be cured of a sickness which is weakening and frustrating it, and which can only lead to new crises. Welfare projects, which meet certain urgent needs, should be considered merely temporary responses. As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved by rejecting the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation and by attacking the structural causes of inequality,¹⁷³ no solution will be found for the world's problems or, for that matter, to any problems. Inequality is the root of social ills.

Confident in Christ and his Gospel for the world the Pope does not shy away from "I" statements. Here are a few from *Evangelii Gaudium* -

- "I am obliged in the name of Christ to remind all that the rich must help respect and promote the poor. I exhort you to generous solidarity and to an ethical approach to economics and finances that favours everyone."
- "I encourage financial experts to ponder the words of one of the sages from antiquity, 'Not to share one's wealth with the poor is to steal from them and to take away their livelihood. It is not our own goods which we hold, but theirs.'"
- "I beg the Lord to grant us more politicians who are genuinely disturbed by the state of society, the people, and the lives of the poor! I ask the Lord to give us more politicians capable of sincere and effective dialogue aimed at healing the deepest roots – and not simply the appearances – of evil in our world. Why not turn to God and ask God to inspire their plans?"

And here's his "I" statement for the Church.

"I repeat for the entire Church what I have often said to the priests and laity of Buenos Aires: I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living

without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: 'give them something to eat'" (Mk 6:37).

Some of you may be thinking – why is he quoting the Pope so extensively? Does he know of no credible Anglican voices on such matter as these? Well there are in fact plenty of those.

The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori speaking to a USA Initiative for ending child poverty called "Stop Hunger Now".

- "Almost a quarter of the children in the USA live in poverty – and hunger is a frequent companion. Over 30% of the children in Washington, DC and New Mexico live in poverty, and over half in Puerto Rico. Worldwide, 1 billion children (45%) are poor and hungry."
- "...there is crippling hunger in our inner cities and rural areas, and on Native American reservations. Many of those places are food deserts, where there is little healthy food available within reach of the people who live there – only junk food. There is growing evidence that the kind of calories people have access to – their nutritional state – affects general health, lifespan, and behavior, and increases the likelihood of all sorts of physical and mental illness: depression, diabetes, aggression, reproductive health, and cognitive ability. It is abundantly clear that hungry children do not learn well, or learn at all.]"
- "Any society that willingly permits children to go hungry needs to have its head and heart examined. Hunger saps the spirit as well as the body, but it's especially horrible for children, for it destroys and diminishes their growing bodies and brains."
- "Deuteronomy challenges us to live in ways that bless the whole body, and encourage its flourishing: 'Open your fist, soften your heart, share what you have. Do this and you will indeed know what it is to be blessed!'
- "Jesus is just as clear: 'if you want to be part of the reign of God, get with the program. Feed the hungry, respond to the pain and misery around you, or you will indeed find yourselves in hell – and it is a hell of your own creation!'"

Speaking to poverty in Great Britain, Archbishop Justin Welby has said

- "...we should all share concern for the poor and the marginalised, should work to build communities where people act responsibly towards one another, whether we are rich or poor we all have the same dignity..."
- "We do not have the luxury of saying, 'Something must be done' without doing anything ourselves."
- "Welby quoted Nelson Mandela that, 'dealing with poverty was a matter of justice rather than charity. 'Welby felt speaking out about poverty, fuel bills, financial insecurity affecting families and Credit unions is part of the Christian duty to love ones neighbour.'"

Njongonkulu Ndungane, who succeeded Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa, declared "Poverty as the new global apartheid."

- “Christians” he said, “should be at the forefront of the fight against poverty, which, in all its ramifications and consequences, is nothing short of evil. It mars the image of God within humanity; it mars his image in the poor as it deprives them of opportunities for abundant life; and it mars his image within those of us who have more than enough, but who, through greed, complacency, or even ignorance, fail to do the justice, to embrace the loving-kindness, that our God asks of us.”

Maylanne Maybee: “We live in a time when more than ever the world needs people who give rather than grasp, who listen rather than tell, who serve rather than rule.”

It is not my intent in this address to speak to the liturgical role of the deacon. Much has been said about that and for the most part it is well defined and honoured. I recognize that in some places its honouring can be a challenge but our stance cannot be simply one of frustration but rather a gracious perseverance in educating the Eucharistic assembly and the presider.

What I want to dwell on is your ministry in the name of Jesus, The Compassionate Christ, and your ministry in the name of Jesus, the Herald of God’s Kingdom, - your servant ministry, your political ministry, your ministry of engaging others in this work. While all the baptized are called to respond to human need by loving service, to respect the dignity of every human being and to strive for justice and peace among all people deacons by virtue of their ordinations are publicly accountable servants. We hold letters of orders and a license to minister. We must be able to give an account of our diakonia

- in spontaneous acts on our own
- in helping the congregation to reach out into the neighbourhood and the greater community
- in working with institutions and agencies at whose core is the prayer, - that the hope of the poor not perish
- in engaging political leaders in conversations that lay the ground work for a social and economic order that is just for all

I know, that all of you are deeply engaged in a variety of ministries in your communities. I have the privilege of seeing many of them across the country, - out of the cold, out of the heat, out of the rain, breakfast programs for kids before they go to school, after school help with homework programs, soup kitchens, Sunday night dinners, food banks, clothing banks, Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Gambling Anonymous, the night shift at shelters for those escaping abuse, the day shift at aboriginal friendship centers, making provision for our churches to maintain open doors for those who want a quiet place to pray, perhaps in the presence of the Reserved Sacrament, provision of bed and breakfast in our parish halls for those who would otherwise be on the streets. The ministries are multiple. And you give yourself to them with glad and kind and generous hearts. And you bring others alongside to share in that ministry. You help them know their calling in Christ, his summons to what Francis calls Jesus’ “revolution of tenderness” in an otherwise cruel world. In all you do you are to those you tend the feet and hands and heart and voice of Jesus. You model what Bishop Michael Ingham described as “sensitive evangelism”. It is diaconal rather than imperial designed for service not conquest... Have you ever stopped to consider in any given day or night how many women and men and dear little children our Church so often through your ministries welcomes and warms, feeds and clothes, shelters and houses, protects and preserves their very lives? Or how many times our Church, so often through your ministries

accompanies people in crisis, through the social assistance application process, through legal aid, through advocacy in the hope of protecting their basic human rights? Your ministries extend the reach of our Church into the community in ways far beyond the knowing or the imagination of many members of our Church. You are like that salt that flavors for good, that light that shines in the darkness of despair, that psalm that lifts a heavy heart, that song that begins a quiet symphony of healing and hope for a brighter future.

Thank you.

This ministry is demanding and it can be costly for you and your family. It can be utterly exhausting and you can be so immersed in it that you can't ever hear the voice of Jesus saying to you and also to his first disciples, "Come now, Come apart and rest a while". Perhaps you will hear his voice in the voice of others who care about you, - your spouse, a spiritual companion, your priest, your bishop, whoever it be, heed their counsel, abide in their loving care and concern for you. Take a break, stay home or go away. Stop and breathe, drink afresh of the wellsprings of grace, taste and see that the Lord is good, that he who calls you, loves you deeply.

I think, in fact I know that one of the most challenging of charges given to deacons is the ministry of "interpreting to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world."

Following on our national Faith, Worship and Ministry Committee's task of producing a document "Competencies for Ordination to the Priesthood in The Anglican Church of Canada", attention has now turned to a similar document for deacons. Dr. Eileen Scully will no doubt speak to that in the workshop she is hosting in the conference.

There is a fairly common admission across our Church and across The Episcopal Church too that our discernment, training and formation programs have been weak and wanting in helping deacons to grasp and take hold of this ministry of interpretation with competence and confidence. "Even" say Susanne Watson Epting, "for those who have had minimal background in the meaning of this charge and the skills needed in fulfilling it, it remains a challenge."

I think in order to be better prepared, attention needs to be given to a number of matters.

- Knowledge of the general subject. What are facts? For example with respect to housing and homelessness are we aware of the many faces of homelessness?
 - those who live in the streets
 - the mentally ill who have been turned out on the streets
 - the elderly
 - the youth who couch surf
 - those who are living in run down hotel rooms
 - those who are living in their cars

What are the facts around disputes over treaty rights? What are the facts associated with responsible resource extraction or climate change? We need to know the facts.

- Thinking about those whose voice we are bringing forward. Those whose voices cannot or will not be heard. Those for whom we in fact must speak.

- Thinking about who we should be consulting for e.g. the Chairs of Housing Societies, the Chairs of Human Rights Commissions.
- Thinking about those with whom we should be partnering in making our case
- Thinking about those before whom we need to stand – city councillors, MLA’s, MP’s.
- Thinking about stating our position as clearly as possible and because we represent the Church, - providing a succinct and sound theological rationale rooted in scripture.
- Inviting dialogue, building partnerships, assembling coalitions of those committed to working together in overcoming unacceptable realities in our society and in the world.
- Identifying companions in this task.
- Naming the assets that exist even in the midst of the mess that can be harnessed for good.
- Pushing for achievable goals setting realistic objectives to meet them, and establishing a timeline and holding everyone to it.
- And finally, as Walter Brueggemann says, “revisiting the prophets, both scriptural and contemporary”. What can we learn from them, “their criticizing and their energizing?”

I recognise that this is by no means a complete list of things to bear in mind for equipping deacons for this important ministry of interpreting to the Church, the needs, hopes, and concerns of the world, and to the powers that be in our governments, municipal, provincial, federal and global. The one other piece that would be incredibly helpful in equipping deacons for this ministry of interpretation would be a program in which they would become well versed in all the UN Declarations with respect to human rights for children, for women, for Indigenous Peoples, for refugees...etc. Surely alongside the calls of the prophets and the gospel of Jesus such declarations should be etched in the minds and on the hearts of deacons.

If I might just take us back to Susanne Watson Epting for a moment, she makes another really important point that this charge, - this ministry of interpretation is in fact “the one the Church itself has the most trouble remembering.” Some of that struggle lies within the conscience of the Church, some within its councils and some within how bishops and deacons sort out and live out their respective ministries one with the other.

The Ordinal speaks of a deacon’s “special ministry of servanthood, directly under the authority of the bishop”. Likewise it speaks of a bishop’s vow “to guide and strengthen the deacons and all others who minister in the Church”.

A conversation about the relationship between bishops and deacons is the focus of the workshop I am hosting in this conference.

Epting says, “In the deacon’s call to ask the Church itself to be continually recreating itself as a community serving God’s mission in and for the world, we know that deacons have sometimes

been described as thorns in the Church's side, or as trouble makers or as nags... . We have even used those terms for ourselves, but I think this is not helpful. What I think we're trying to describe is the fact that asking the Church to look at and engage in the world around us is not always easy. Inviting the Church to enter life's wounds and to befriend those affected by those wounds, is invariably challenging..."Asking the church to tend to the things in its own life that get in the way of that is also difficult – and lonely. But for deacons to use these negative descriptions about their ministries may lead to an unintended self-imposed exile. And for others to use them demeans a role that is grounded in the church's prophetic tradition."

I have quoted Epting extensively, - all from an article entitled "Common Vows and Common Mission" in the Winter 2010 Volume 92 of the Anglican Theological Review. She is worth quoting and I give the final word to her, - "Diaconal leadership" writes Epting, "is willing to know the world deeply enough to be able to interpret it". It is willing to invite the Church to dismantle what gets in the way of God's mission in and for the world. ...Diaconal leadership asks hard questions, speaks from a position of strength and energizes with hope."

The hope of which she speaks is Isaiah like hope, - that hope of which Jesus read in the synagogue in Nazareth and embodied in his own ministry, that hope we are called to embody in our own. To Christ whose servants we are we pray,

“Christ be ever before us,
Christ be ever behind us,
Christ be ever within.

Christ upon our left hand watching,
at our right hand guiding;
Christ above, beneath us guarding,
near to us abiding.

Christ be in each holy silence,
Christ be in our speaking,
Christ in every work we offer,
ever in our seeking.

Amen.”

(Hymn 483, Common Praise)