

ΔΙΑΚΟΝΙΑ

SERVICE

Talk on the Second Day, after breakfast

I would like to think about the concept of service today, as it is the concept that gives the diaconate its title. I think that when we take up a word which has a really established, central place in the Christian life – in Scripture, in theological vocabulary, in the tradition of the Church, and in everyday Christian usage – we shall find that it relates to a whole gamut of truths which start and finish with the reality of God.

We shall keep a good understanding of them as long as we keep in touch with God as their origin, with God as their destination.

In all three of the Synoptic Gospels a saying of Jesus is reported: I will read it in the version according to Mark.

Jesus called them to him and said: You know that those who think to rule the nations lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. This must not happen among you. Rather, whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be the slave of all; for even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life in place of many, as a ransom.

I would like to draw your attention to the inclusion in one passage of the two terms *servant* (διακονος) and *slave* (δουλος). In practice there is no great difference in Biblical usage between the two; people we would call *servants* are called by either term. However, there is about the term δδιακονος a specific note of trust or authorization which does not attach to slavery. The presence of both terms when Jesus is outlining essential qualifications for primacy in the Christian community, is therefore significant.

This passage is of great importance to us, because in it Jesus is holding together two overtly contradictory ideas:

- on the one hand, greatness (or primacy), and
- on the other hand, service (or slavery to all).

Clearly this kind of apparent contradiction *requires* an explanation, and we have learned enough of the way of the Gospel to know that Jesus uses paradox very readily, because his being in the place he calls *the world* is always paradoxical. He is the *Saviour* of the *unsaved* world, he is the *presence* of the *absent* God, he is the *manifestation* of the *unseen*; his very presence is provocative of contradiction and incongruity (Lk 22:27):

Who is greater: the one at table, or the one who serves? The one at table, surely? Yet here I am among you as one who serves.

I would like to suggest that we think about this paradox as it affects the ordained deacon, priest, or bishop. Those who are, in our Lord's words, "great" or "first" among Christians, must be *servants* and *slaves*. Conversely, those who are servants and slaves among Christians are *great*, and *first*.

Grandiloquent titles have abounded in the Church. Some bishops, perhaps without noticing the incongruity of it, still find it quite acceptable to be called "My Lord" after the style of barons of the realm, and I suppose that, if we continue to enthrone them and dress them up in regalia, we can't be surprised at it. (Translate it into Italian, and you get "Monsignor", which is even stranger; I used to share a parish with a man who had been happily called "Canon" in the education departments of the Diocese for years, who on receiving the appointment as a Domestic Prelate found himself habitually addressed as *Mon Sewer*, which he did not feel to be an improvement.) Archbishops are addressed as "Your Grace", which is the style of a royal Duke, and Cardinals are so exalted that it is *their Eminence* that is approached, rather than themselves. The ultimate arrogance is, of course, reserved to the Man in White, who is simply *Your Holiness*, which at least avoids the language of earthly greatness: but he has plenty of other titles which have never been precisely renounced (*Father of Princes, Father of the Fatherland, High Priest of Rome, Patriarch of the West*, for instance) many of which used to belong to the Emperors of Rome, and which were slowly picked up at various stages as unconsidered trifles with no current owner. One notices with joy the present Pope's removal of the Papal tiara from Vatican heraldry; it belongs in the chamber of horrors of some museum.

Some of the bearers of these titles have been accustomed to expect ceremony which even crowned heads have now renounced; they have sometimes lived in a world that has passed away from all but the more despotic banana-republics. Most Bishops now insist on a humbler, more democratic mode of life; I heard of one bishop who, in Rome for World Youth Day, slept with his party of diocesan pilgrims in a field. But some still crave the old four-posted, canopied pedestalism which characterized Innocent III and Boniface VIII; just as the architecture of the past still sets a wrong and unfortunate tone for much of our life as a Church. Let the Pope tell himself twenty times a day that he is the *servant of the servants of God*: I would still defy him not to be adversely affected in the humility department by being carried into St Peter's Square on a portative throne surrounded by Guards in Renaissance livery, and greeted with the honours reserved for an absolute monarch of the sixteenth century. How does a man's humility survive living beneath two thousand square feet of Raphael's fresco exalting the prerogatives of his own office?

Because our Church is so determinedly Papal, and because it is centralized to a greater extent than has recently been the case, it is natural that some of these problems should trickle down to us; indeed, if Jesus had to reprove his Galilean fishermen for their ambition and self-aggrandisement, we should not be surprised to find these dangers alive for us too. The antidote, as for any sin, for me or you or for his holiness the Pope, is *to return to Christ*, to listen again to the way Jesus addresses the problem. As he listens to his disciples, the Lord hears in their voices the force of worldly power, and he knows that this has got to die in them if they are to belong to the kingdom of heaven. So we should not listen to this part of the Gospel as if it is merely a lesson in manners, a matter of good taste. Jesus is trying to exorcise a demon from the Church; that is why what he is saying in this area

always includes the anticipation of the Passion itself, the ultimate struggle against Satan.

The human culture of the Church has not been good at avoiding the pitfall of ambition. Few priests are so crude as to want to be given titles, or so stupid as to covet an episcopal role. But ambition can take more disguised, but equally obnoxious form, in the ambition to dominate the lives of others, the urge to lead or moderate in every situation, the clerical assumption of primacy as a personal possession. *This must not happen among you.* The survival of the Church demands that there be in it the mind that was in Christ Jesus

who, being in the form of God,
did not count equality with God a thing to be clung to,
but emptied himself to take the form of a δουλος,
and became like us humans;
and being in all things like a human being,
he humbled himself becoming obedient unto death –
and death on a cross.

See how closely Paul associates the rank of a δουλος with the mystery of the Cross itself: it is as if Jesus' understanding of himself as *servant* is the universal model for our following of him. We can further buttress this by reading a story of the Last Supper in the Fourth Gospel.

Before the festival of the Passover, Jesus, knowing that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father, having loved those who were his in the world, loved them to the end.

They were at supper, and the devil had already put it into the mind of Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray him. Jesus knew that the Father had put everything into his hands, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; and he arose from the table, removed his outer garments and, taking a towel, wrapped it around his waist: he then poured water into a bowl and began to wash his disciples' feet, wiping them with the towel he was wearing. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, *Lord, are you going to wash my feet?* Jesus answered, *At this moment you do not know what I am doing, but later you will know.* Peter said: *Never! You shall never wash my feet.* Jesus replied, *If I do not wash me, you can have no inheritance in me.* Simon Peter said: *Then Lord, not only my feet, but my hands and head as well.* Jesus said: *No-one who has bathed needs washing: he is clean all over. You too are clean, though not all of you are.* He knew who was to betray him, so he said: *not all of you are.*

When he had washed their feet and resumed his garments, he returned to the table. He said: *Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord – and rightly: so I am. If I then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you must wash each other's feet. I have given you an example, so that you may copy what I have done to you. In all truth I tell you, no servant is greater than*

his master, no messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know this, blessed are you if you behave accordingly.

We can now see our way to the first meditation I would like you to make. In a few weeks some of you will have hands laid on you in the rite of ordination. An outsider will see the Bishop at the centre of this action: but you will see Christ. Of this moment it can truly be said to you:

At this moment you do not know what I am doing to you. Later you will understand.

Not one of you can claim to know exactly why you are being ordained, what the meaning of your ordination is, what the end of the story will be. Not having this information, you can't very well plan for the future – any more than Peter could. There lay ahead of Peter the utter evacuation of the last traces of his closeness to Jesus – so that he could say of his Master:

I do not know the man – I do not know what you are talking about. I do not know the man.

Only when he bursts into tears and leaves the stage of the passion is he ready to be recruited as an apostle, a witness to the Resurrection – which, according to *his* plan for the future, would never have been necessary or even possible. If Peter had been given his head, there would have been no crucifixion. Meditate on that! The Gospel seems to tell us, if there had been no crucifixion, there would be no real disciples. In the Fourth Gospel, after all, it is only on the seashore, after the Resurrection, that Jesus finally says to Peter, *Follow Me*.

What about you? Have you worked out a viable, positive plan for your following of Christ, and if it works well, will there be a crucifixion?

I would like you candidates to acknowledge that you *have* got plans for the future as a deacon. You would scarcely be human if you hadn't; you wouldn't have begun to be trained.

But I also want you to acknowledge that much of the agenda you have formed is of human origin rather than the result of a specific vocation from the Lord. Whilst we may get away for quite a long time with the execution of our own plans, in the end we can only be δῆκονοὶ insofar as we are doing “not our will, but his”.

Let me use a priest as an example. He looks out on his parish, and perhaps he likes what he sees. There are good families there, with healthy relationships, smart kids, and generous motives. He throws himself into the school as governor, teacher, and playground participant; he helps to encourage the PTA and he sees the fruit of his good work as the school gets good results and rises in the league tables. He demolishes the parish hall and builds a bigger one, and there is a successful social event every weekend. The choir wins prizes in contests, the servers win the five-a-side football in the Diocese, large numbers of parishioners turn up at Walsingham and Lourdes and attend courses and conferences. The collections are huge, and an expensive restoration scheme gives them a church which is visited by tourists and wins a civic amenity award. He is made a Monsignor and drives a superb motor-car. He is a holy tycoon. *All men speak well of him.*

But another of our Lord's sayings could also be said of him: *even the pagans do as much, do they not?* It is very possible for a man to seek to do all these good and successful things from purely personal motives. He wants to succeed, he wants to live a fulfilling existence; of course he will try to *do all things well*. And in a real sense we can say that he has *loved to say his prayers standing up at the street corners and in the squares, and has taken the front seats at banquets, and has come to wear longer tassels and broader phylacteries*; and there is no reason for anyone to find fault with him. When he dies some Bishop will say of him: *Well done, thou good and faithful servant: enter into the joy of thy Lord*. And we must hope that he will.

Part of your psychiatric assessment was designed to test how far you need human respect, how far you have regard for human approval. The extent indicated was very considerable. It is clear that many of you suspect that the Church only ordains the best people to the Diaconate. This isn't true. If you abandon the dreadful urge to deserve ordination, your real privilege will become visible: that you are ordained to be an unworthy servant *because God's Church chooses to call you*.

A person who is truly a *servant* in Christian terms will not require to know, before he starts out, where he is being led, so that he can agree to it; indeed, he will be quick to recognize the moment when the Lord's way divides from his own, and will be ready to follow the obedient, rather than the selfish path. Only when the Lord has *made known to him everything* he has *learned from the Father* will the servant advance to be called a friend of Jesus. Jesus' own *learning from the Father* certainly included the agony of Gethsemane, and the Cross. Alas for sleek Monsignor, who is still spelling out *his* plans for the parish of St Peter, and whose life has never been prostrated in the Garden, or spread-eagled on Calvary! The deacon's task is to become like Christ by serving, by being under commands from the Lord of Calvary. He will never accomplish this merely by living out some plan of his own, even one he can fulfil with style, and to public applause, by making himself humanly acceptable within a successful parish community. *Even the pagans do as much*. We have therefore to examine ourselves with rigour, and watch the Lord with sharp attention, so that we can see what his call holds for us. You can, I hope, see a very real way in which we must change, and become like little children, so as to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus sat down, called the Twelve to him, and said to them: *If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all*. He then took a little child, and set him in front of them, and said to them: *Anyone who welcomes one of these little children in my name, welcomes me; and anyone who welcomes me welcomes not me, but the one who sent me*.