

Who's imitating who? 1 Corinthians 4.14-21

When you have successfully completed ordination training in the Church of England you are ordained as a deacon. A year goes by and then, God willing, you are ordained as a priest. So, you have two ordination services, a year apart from each other. Before each ordination service you attend a pre-ordination retreat. In Chester Diocese this takes place at Foxhill. Of course, this year will be different because of Covid. Maybe next year will be as well, we'll see.

I went for my second ordination service in 2016. I have forgotten the name of the woman who led our pre-ordination retreat. At the end of our retreat she gave us all a piece of cloth into which she had embroidered '2016'. She asked us to keep these cloths in our cassock pockets as a reminder that, although we were about to be ordained as priests, we would still be deacons. Deacons are servants. Servants need cloths to wipe things up with. The cloth in our cassock pockets was there to remind us of our calling to serve the people of God.

On the day of the ordination service the sense of excitement at Foxhill grows. The rule about keeping silent at mealtimes is lifted and so we chat over our lunch before driving to Chester to reassemble at Bishop's House next door to the cathedral. There is a room there where ordinands get changed ready for the service. I remember there being an awful lot of chatter about stoles as we got our new priest stoles out and put them on over our surplices.

Then it's time for the group photograph and we are organised in the right order to process into the cathedral so that we all end up sitting in the right seat. I remember standing in line in bright sunlight waiting to be led into the

cathedral with the chatter about stoles continuing around me. Suddenly the words that Jesus spoke to Peter came into my head; “You will stretch out your hands and someone will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go. Follow me”

On a number of levels these words did not apply to my situation at all. I was not stretching out my hands. Nobody was fastening a belt around me. Nobody was leading me where I did not want to go. And I was going willingly. And yet ...

And yet I had a really strong sense at that moment of following in the footsteps not of Jesus so much but of Peter. I had committed to follow as he had followed and there was no turning back. I had committed to serve as he had served. And when my stole needed adjusting round my neck, somebody adjusted that for me so that I would be led into the cathedral with my outward sign of being a servant properly in place just as the inward sign of the embroidered cloth was lodged safely in my cassock pocket.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells the church there that he is sending Timothy to them. He describes Timothy as his “beloved and faithful child in the Lord”. He is being sent to Corinth to remind them of Paul’s ways in Jesus Christ.

In other words, Timothy was sent to Corinth because he was a faithful imitator of Paul so that the church in Corinth could imitate Timothy in their lives and, thereby, become imitators of Paul, who in turn lived as a faithful imitator of Christ.

In fact, all the authority that Paul exercises rests on his faithful imitation of Christ crucified. In the eyes of the world he has no authority; he is the

rubbish of the world; he speaks foolishness.

But this rubbish and this foolishness as the world sees it is, in fact, the power and wisdom of God which the church in Corinth will be able to attain if they are prepared to follow Timothy who is in turn a faithful follower of Paul, the apostle of Christ crucified.

Let's take a moment today to reflect on those whom we have followed in their faithful imitation of Christ crucified and give thanks for them. For me, I will remember the woman whose name I have now forgotten who gave me the cloth that I occasionally close my hand around when I am trying to find my keys. She set me on the path of following Peter as a follower of Christ on that precious sunlit day.

And let us also take a moment today to reflect on those who will follow us. Those who will see us acting in ways that the world considers foolish but is in fact the wisdom of God in action. Those who will see us being held in disrepute even though the power of God resides within us. They will see us. They will understand. And they will follow. They will follow us, and their eyes will turn towards the crucified Christ whose mind we seek to have.

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