

## **Sermon for ordination of deacons - Transfiguration**

**Feb 3rd. 2018**

**Mark 9.1-8**

'Listen to Him'. Those for me are the most powerful words in our Gospel reading this morning. Active not passive listening. On the edge of our seat listening. Listening to Christ in those we encounter, the art of listening, requires of course patience and prayer. On our silent retreat we have been encouraged to listen, listen to God's voice, listen for the heartbeat of Christ within and give thanks and praise for our call to be a Deacon. The Cathedral providing a signer so the deaf amongst us can hear too!!

What a magnificent Cathedral and what a wonderful ministry.

A Cathedral committed to supporting the marginalised and the vulnerable. It's the marginalised and vulnerable who have taught me most about faith hope and love. A Servant hearted Cathedral clothed in diaconate attire, with the banner of welcome flying high. A Cathedral recognising both the awesome nature of God and the Suffering servant heart of Christ. I encourage all of you to visit regularly this mother church of the Diocese as a symbol of unity in diversity. So many signs and symbols of God's love surround us. Let's catch glimpses at every moment.

My pectoral Cross is a symbol which never ceases to provide conversation. It's the Trinity? It's the sign of Calvary? In the Riverina someone suggested it might be the sign of the International Harvest!! I love that. Most appropriate as I have been travelling my vast Diocese of Riverina celebrating Harvest festivals recently. But today it's the sign of the transfiguration as it catches the light. It's where we belong beside Jesus in his suffering and his glorious transfiguration. I pray that our light may so shine that others may see our good works and glorify our Father which is in heaven. Glory and suffering sometimes if not always belong together.

This morning I want to emphasise of course the role of a Deacon in Christ's Church, which remains the ministry of both priests and bishops. To have a servant heart is the true calling of all Christians, but the Deacon is a particular symbol of servanthood in the Church. I have been privileged to serve you as your retreat conductor, and have myself been strengthened, energised and transformed by the experience. Thank you. You have reminded me of my first love, to serve our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

To serve effectively suggests St Paul in His letter to the Ephesians you have to spend time in preparation. I used the chapter six this morning as the Epistle. The final chapter as we heard is about preparing for action, by putting on the armour of God. When the going gets tough in ministry I put on the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation all as a defence against the dark side. Then to be armed with the sword of the spirit, the Word of God to cut through the darkness with the light of Christ.

Then comes the most important and often neglected addition which is the polish, the polish of prayer. Without it our faith can soon be tarnished, and we find chinks in the armour. With prayer we are constantly enriched and restored. I am not the best at praying but I am enthusiastic, passionate, often spontaneous and easily inspired so I have always needed a spiritual director who continually asks about my prayer life. My first spiritual director was so prayerful. Her name was Sister Benedicta, and Anglican Nun from Walsingham. From a very early age she was very frail in health and the rigours of Convent life were sent by the Mother Superior to be too tough. So she was allowed to live in a small cottage in the parish where I was Curate. By the way she lived till she was nearly 90! Every day she would set off to walk the streets of the parish blessing everyone she passed or met. As

she stopped to listen, she would take the joys and sorrows, the challenges and celebrations to her heart and spend the rest of the day in prayer. She was mischievous, full of joi de vivre underneath her wimple. Once I asked her what she missed by being a nun. She replied ' The wind in my hair!' Being set apart requires sacrifice but always results in transformation.

The polish of prayer is then essential, before we embark on any new adventure in mission or set out on a new day.

I have recently ordained Neale in the Diocese of Riverina to the priesthood. He has transformed the parish he serves, growing both spiritually and in numbers in Church. However he did get a complaint early in his ministry. 'He prays too much!!' Let's all be accused of that. He learnt the habit when spending a year in a monastery, if you'll excuse the pun!

Before any extraordinary event in Jesus life and ministry we find Jesus setting time aside for prayer. Obviously we need to pray. To encourage others to meet regularly in 'a certain place' to pray for the future mission and ministry of the Church. To set aside time to focus on the journey of Jesus from the wilderness to the Cross and on to resurrection.

From survival in the desert, to revival on the mountain top.

So as you begin a new phase of ministry, what are your expectations? I suggest that you particularly make yourself available and search out the marginalised. Perhaps leave your Vicar to look after the 99 while you venture

after the one that's gone astray. The extraordinary thing I have found is that it is those on the edge teach us far more than we can teach them. Receive from them much more than we can give. There but for the grace of God go I.

I pray that your ministry will be story rich like mine, and the Church you serve a story rich church.

I shared with you on our retreat stories of my experiences as Prison Chaplain in a High security prison in Hong Kong for ten years. The inmates had time on their hands, so I invited to them to pray. About what and who they would ask? Well every week I would give them a list to pray about from the outside and every week on my return they wanted to know the results!!

God is a God of surprise. They surprised me with their generosity of spirit. Every week when I visited their workshop they would present me with a large mug of congee. Into it they would stir in treats they had saved cuttlefish, curry powder and other spices. I valiantly ate it with thanks. After a while one of them said you don't really like our congee. Well it's a challenge I admitted. After that they bought milk and chocolate from their meagre prison wages.

One of the prisoners particularly transformed and continues to transform my ministry. He spent 13 years of a 19 year sentence in solitary. He was a notorious triad leader and was always blamed for anything that went wrong in the prison so he took himself into solitary. I used to visit him every week and discovered he was a brilliant artist. I asked him if he would illustrate articles in our parish magazine, design our Christmas cards to raise money for prison education. Design T shirts for our youth group, and illustrate bible stories for Sunday school. Not much to ask!! After a few years, as our relationship deepened so his faith in Jesus was slowly fanned into flame. We became soul friends. I left him to return to the UK before he was released - but I returned a couple of years later and went in search

of him. I found him in the depths of Hong Kong. He had opened a tattoo parlour, amongst his clients the rich and famous, including I might add David Beckham, and a Middle Eastern Sultan. His apprentices were his young now ex- triad gang members. In the foyer of his parlour was a tattoo design of a Cross pride of place amongst the skulls and Chinese dragons. He thanked me for introducing him to Jesus and sharing my faith with him. Could he share his faith by giving me a tattoo! He designed it and I suffered. Later when I was elected as Bishop of Riverina I asked if I could use the design as my pectoral cross. He was delighted.

The Cross of Christ flanked by the two criminals, the crosses making the bars of a prison. Underneath he had written in Chinese John 8.32 the truth will set you free. My promise was to share his story whenever the opportunity arose. Chosen despite his past. I saw in him an artist and a man of real passion. He had made some wrong turns but God saw in him such potential. God doesn't want us to be perfect - just excellent! Gabriel was excellent.

Jesus chose according to potential, chose because of what they could become.

When he chose Simon Peter he didn't see the fisherman he saw the preacher at Pentecost. Matthew - not the tax collector but a gospel writer. Thomas not a doubter but a courageous man who proclaimed 'My Lord and my God'

Jesus invested himself into the disciples to see his character flow out of their lives. I wonder what potential Jesus sees in each of you. A God of surprises!

So let's always clothe ourselves with the armour of God when things get tough and polish your life with prayer so you may reflect the light of Christ in your ministry and not be tarnished by the world.

Today the Church is looking to you, with prophetic vision. To cook up a new recipe for mission, out of some already special ingredients that God has provided. After all here we are about to eat and drink at the Lords table. Simple bread and simple wine, but blessed by God becomes the energy for life itself, transformed to energise us as we are invited to share in the life of Jesus. Remembering God doesn't call the equipped he equips the called. God doesn't expect us to be perfect just excellent. And finally, let's remember every day is a gift from God how we live it is our gift to Him.

May the Lord bless you may his face shine on you and give you his peace his love and his joy. Amen