

*-serving as salt and light*  
a sermon preached on the  
*fifth sunday after epiphany*  
9 February 2020  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
*by Reverend Colleen Clayton*

the lections: Isaiah 58.1-9a; Psalm 112; 1 Corinthians 2.1-13; Matthew 5:13-20

A year ago today, I was about to be ordained a Deacon in the Church of God. My degree was finished, the pre-ordination retreat was done. All that remained was the service in the cathedral and the next day, all of my life's experiences up to that point were to be offered to God in a new way as I came to begin my ontologically changed life as Assistant Curate at St John's Camberwell. No pressure!

Well, what a joyful, turbulent, year it has been, getting to know you, getting to know me in a new way, and as always, continuing to get to know God.

Today Jonathan, you are one day on from where I was on the same date, sitting here, ordained and taking up your role as the new curate of St John's Camberwell. Congratulations and welcome. Welcome to the learning, the delight, the stumbling, the frustration, the joy, the companionship, of being a Deacon in the Church of God here in this community.

Today's Gospel reading from Matthew seems a particularly good one for a first day as a deacon. You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world, says Jesus and we rejoice! But, as always with Jesus, there is more. Salt that has lost its saltiness is not good for anything but is thrown out and trampled underfoot, he says. Lamps are not lit to be hidden inside baskets but to shine from lampstands.

Unsalty salt is not true to itself. Light that does not illuminate is not really light. You can sprinkle your food with white granules that look like salt, but if they turn out to be something else, your taste buds will know. You can turn on all the switches in the house, but if you also cover all the light bulbs with dark cloths, you will still stumble in the darkness. In this reading Jesus tells us the importance of being true to who we are called to be. It's not enough to just look the part, it's about really being who we are called to be. That is our purpose as Christians, to be real. No pressure!  
Who, or what are deacons called to be? What is their true purpose? How do they become real?

The first image that leaps to mind is that deacons are called to be servants of all. The vast majority of those ordained deacon will go on to be ordained priest. We are often reminded that our primary ordination is as a deacon and that calling never leaves us whether we remain a deacon forever, live out our lives as parish priests or go on to become the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Yes, the call of the deacon is to serve. But this is not about life being forced into an unrealistic or demeaning servitude. Serving others is not about being below others. It is about focusing beyond ourselves on what is best for the good functioning of the whole. It is not about being downtrodden but about being so grounded in God that our own truth and reality cannot be influenced by the opinions of others, good or bad. To serve in this way

requires us to know ourselves well enough to be able to deeply and truly be ourselves and thereby help others to be themselves. We are called to serve through becoming more real.

Yesterday, in her sermon at the ordination, Denise Nicholls encouraged all the ordinands to bring their gifts to God through their ministries. But, she said, remember, you are not God's gift. I'm afraid I completely disagree with her. You are God's gift to us Jonathan! You! You and every other person who ever was. We are all God's gifts. Just as we are. Flawed, gifted, growing into our humanity, called to be really ourselves precisely so that we can be God's gift to the world.

The Gospel passage we heard today follows immediately on from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount where he tells the crowds that the poor, the mourning, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted, reviled and falsely accused are blessed. Blessed. These are also the ones to whom he says, you are the salt of the earth.

So, don't just bring us your gifts Jonathan. Be a gift to us. Your gifts are fantastic and varied. We will delight in them as we experience and benefit from them. I hope you will also delight in our gifts! But giftedness is not the whole story of who any of us is.

Be real with us. Come to us also with the parts of you that know and understand poverty, grief, despair, longing and loneliness. Encourage us to know that, as we wrestle with those difficult human things, we too are blessed. Each and every one of us. Blessed as we live as real, salty, human beings, daring to let our light shine for all to see.

The image of being a servant is a helpful reminder of what diaconal ministry, and indeed all ministry is about, but it is by no means the only image of the role of the deacon. Deacons can also be understood as; ambassadors, bridge builders, pioneers, messengers, advocates and icons of Christ.

These are images of the kind of life to which salty, light giving, real deacons are called. And they are splendid images aren't they! Strong, wonderful, purposeful.

They also seem quite daunting to me Jonathan. Perhaps they do to you too. I think they always have. Jesus said, For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 5:20) No pressure!

And let's be clear. Jesus is not saying that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees isn't worth much. On the contrary, he is saying that the law by which they live righteous lives is so important that not even the smallest letter or part of a letter of the law will pass away until it is all accomplished. Jesus has not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it.

But, despite what might sound initially like an impossible task (the outdoing in righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees) Jesus' words about the law are hopeful. The law, as he describes it is a bit like unsalty salt or darkened light. On its own it is not the whole story. It provides a framework for righteousness, but it cannot effectively express God's true will and purpose for humanity. It is not wrong, but it is incomplete.

Instead of freeing people, the law places impossible burdens on them. The solution is not to get rid of it or ignore it but for it to be fulfilled. God, who gave the law in the first place, fulfills it and makes it true to its purpose by writing it as a whole, perfect human being; a human being through whom we too are made whole.

This Gospel reading with its emphasis on the real, salty salt, shining lights and the fulfilment of the law, makes me think of a startling comment made by the late biblical scholar, theologian and activist, Walter Wink. He wrote a book called *The Human Being: Jesus and*

the Enigma of the Son of Man<sup>1</sup> in which he claims that only God is really Human. Only God is really human. The good news is that since we are made in God's image and likeness, we are capable of becoming more truly human ourselves.

If God is in some sense true humanness, then divinity inverts itself. Divinity is not a qualitatively different reality; quite the reverse, divinity is fully realised humanity. Only God is, as it were, Human. The goal of life, then, is not to become something we are not – divine – but to become what we truly are – human. We are not required to become divine: flawless, perfect, without blemish. We are invited simply to become human, which means growing through our sins and mistakes, learning by trial and error, being redeemed over and over from compulsive behaviour – becoming ourselves, scars and all. It means embracing and transforming those elements in us that we find unacceptable. It means giving up pretending to be good and, instead becoming real.<sup>2</sup>

Welcome Jonathan to your life as a Deacon in the Church of God. Welcome to the ontological change that means that today you are exactly the same, and completely different, from who you were yesterday. Serve amongst us as a deacon who encourages us to be salty, to be light filled, to be real, as together we become more and more fully human, so that the world may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Wink, Walter. *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of Man*. Fortress Press, 2001. ISBN 0-8006-3262-1

<sup>2</sup> Review and appreciation: Walter Wink's *The Human Being* <https://go.gale.com>