

26 years ago someone looking like me, but slimmer and with more hair, was ordained deacon in Durham Cathedral. The Bishop involved was David Jenkins, so that might set your thoughts running, but I came back the next year to be ordained priest, and have the paperwork to prove it. This morning in York Minster 1 man - Gareth - and 8 women were ordained deacon, coming from different backgrounds and experiences to be given their public role in the church's ministry. An ordination is always a privilege to attend, and I had the unexpected pleasure of acting for the Acting Archdeacon of the East Riding, and presented our Archdeaconry's candidates.

Today has other significances for York Minster also. St Peter is York's patron, and today a newly carved figure of Peter sits on top of the East Front, replacing one that had become badly worn after 600 years of sun, wind, rain and snow. The Dean dedicated it this afternoon, the only difference between now and the equivalent event in medieval times being that the congregation on College Green was watching it, I gather, on big screens. It strikes me as rather fitting that Peter, the rock on whom the church's ministry is built, is commemorated today in a stone sculpture which will last for centuries, and in new ministries which will themselves play their part in ensuring that, in years to come there will still be a church full of living stones.

Gareth, you are part of that. To be ordained on St Peter's Day is to face head on the question Jesus asked Peter in our New Testament reading: "Do you love me?" Jesus asks: Do you love me enough to follow me? Do you love me enough to follow me to a death which will glorify God? To be ordained is not the only way to make plain the fact that we are following Jesus's way for our lives, but it is public and challenging for those who are called. For many it will mean laying aside an occupation and a community which have defined them, moving somewhere else to train and to another place to begin ordained ministry. To follow can mean to leave behind, as it has for Gareth, even if he used to work for Chem Dry in Beverley. For others their new ministry is to be found closer to home. For people like Rachel Young ordination meant finding herself in their familiar surroundings but in an unfamiliar guise: the teacher is now a Reverend as well, the family member is a curate. To follow can mean to feel out of place in what was once comfortable.

"Do you love me?" asks Jesus of Peter. The question is one of profound challenge and of profound comfort. The comfort is there because through this encounter the three denials Peter made of even knowing Jesus just days before are wiped out by three assertions of love. Simply by being given a role and a place among Jesus's followers Peter is ransomed and healed and restored and forgiven. But challenge is there too. Love is not love if it is simply spoken about and not enacted, not given flesh. "Feed my sheep, then. Feed my lambs. Follow me wherever I will lead." There is comfort and challenge in the command, the invitation, to follow Christ; Jesus makes clear that for Peter this will mean a journey towards his own death. Do you still want to follow?

We trust that this will not be required of Gareth, or of the eight other the new deacons in the Diocese of York, though this morning they were given signs of the servant ministry they will undertake by receiving a bowl and a towel, remembering that Jesus washed his disciples' feet, and were then asked to follow that example "even to death itself". What else is following Christ unless it is offering his servant love to a world broken by tyranny, violence and oppression? What else is following Christ unless it is challenging injustice, standing up for the marginalised, welcoming the stranger and revealing the Kingdom of God? What else is following Christ unless it is to stand when people ask us to deny him, and risk being ostracised and attacked?

If this is what it is to be, then "Do you love me?" Do you love me enough to leave your past and move to an uncertain future? In the grace of God, Gareth, there will be pleasant places to serve, Minsters to worship in, sandwiches and wine after Evensong. But the next place might be very different: a friend of mine was beaten up in his own churchyard in London a year or two ago; it is our brothers and sisters who are attacked by those who would make them deny their faith in harsh places across the world, even today. The question to all of us is this: is your presence here, is your following Christ, convenient, or the only thing it is possible for you to do? To follow is to have no choice, for who else has the words of eternal life?

Thanks be to God that Jesus does not send while he remains behind, but asks us to follow, to be accompany him on the journey. Gareth and the eight other deacons, including Lyn Kenny and Nicky Penn-Allison have made a public statement that they will do that today. We too are asked to say yes, out of our love for Christ, to whom be all praise and glory in the church, now and for ages of ages. Amen.