

Epiphany 5B: CCSY, 4 February 2018
Isa 40:21-31, 1 Cor 9:16-23, Mk 1:29-39

You can't be what you can't see

'[Jesus] came and took her by the hand and lifted her up . . . and she began to serve them.' (Mark 1:31)

It's significant that Roxanne's first expression of ordained ministry as a deacon, having been lifted up from the laying on of archepiscopal hands just yesterday, is to serve the followers of Christ from this table.

I was reminded this week of the old saying, 'you can't be what you can't see.' Which is to say, it's hard to aspire to something that isn't modelled for us. It was in the context of the second AFLW season now upon us, affording me a gratuitous reference to a rare Carlton win this weekend! The point being that so many girls and women of all ages, have taken up the code since the introduction of a women's league at AFL level.

So too with the ordination of women in the Anglican Church of Australia. Once, after a long struggle, the first women were ordained, 'You can't be what you can't see', quickly became 'you can be what you can see', and generations of female clergy have since followed in the footsteps of those who first embodied Holy Orders as women, as evidenced at yesterday's ordination service.

Of course in the Church we're better at seeing some things, some people, than others; and pretty good at turning a blind eye to what we'd rather not see, or like to pretend we haven't seen. But that's a sermon for another occasion.

As we welcome Roxanne to her new ministry here, we do well to reflect on what she embodies for us as a deacon: what is it that we might see in the office she inhabits, such that we might also be 'diaconal' – 'deacon-like' – in our respective ministries, be they lay or ordained?

And there is something emblematic about the deacon in the life and work of the Church. If, to paraphrase Ignatius of Antioch, we might say that 'where the bishop is, there is the Church', might we likewise say 'where the deacon is, there is the Gospel'? Certainly Roxanne's stewardship of the Gospel book in our liturgy would bear that out.

We are blessed to have three deacons serving from this table in different capacities, all of whom were involved in Roxanne's commissioning just now: permanent Deacons Mother Marilyn (our Parish Deacon), and Mother Patricia (Chair of Roxanne's Field Committee); and now Mother Roxanne herself, a deacon in transition to priesthood, whose diaconal orders are inseparable from the calling to priestly ministry.

Whatever ministries these deacons exercise in the world and in the church – and they are many and varied – these are always an extension of the liturgical ministry they exercise on Sundays and at other times.

Their liturgical action – what they 'do' in worship – impels their diaconal work beyond the liturgy, which in turn informs and interprets the liturgical action of the deacon. Each is an outworking and expression of the other.

But the liturgical action is primary, in every sense. For Anglicans, worship serves as both mirror and lamp to our life and work: reflecting back to us all that we are and do, and shedding light on all that we are called to be and become.

In worship we are gathered and formed by God's gracious invitation; and our worship sends us out into the world God loves to exercise baptismal ministry, as clergy and lay people. Everything we undertake as a household of faith and fellowship is resourced – and critiqued – by our worship.

Within that, the ministry of the liturgical deacon – always exercised by someone in deacon's orders when present – is especially instructive.

There's a very real sense in which the deacon leads the worship: carrying the Gospel book in procession; initiating most of the liturgical movement; calling us to prayer and confession; proclaiming the Gospel; introducing the creed and the intercessions; preparing and ministering at the altar during the Great Thanksgiving; prompting the acclamations; inviting participation in the Lord's Prayer; overseeing the ablutions and the reservation and distribution of the Sacrament for pastoral ministry during the week; and 'dismissing' us for our Christian discipleship in the world. I can sense Roxanne feeling tired!

Perhaps the most significant action the deacon performs in the worship is to carry the Gospel book out of church in procession at the end of the Eucharist.

As we watch the Gospel book held aloft (liturgically crowd-surfed, as it were) and going before us into the world, our baptismal calling is symbolically enacted. We follow the deacon – pied-piper-like – out of church and into our jobs, our classes, our families, our trams, our social circles, our discourses, our consuming, our voting, our spending, our conflict, our carbon footprints, our leisure, and whatever else the week holds for each of us, carrying the Gospel.

The liturgical action of the deacon is central in reminding us that whenever we invoke God in worship we hold ourselves accountable to God's call on our lives, thus enabling us to be what we see, joining our Sundays to our Mondays.

The 'servant leadership' of the deacon in the liturgy models for us the servant leadership into which all the baptised are drawn by virtue of our being in Christ, who is our great high priest and our great 'Archdeacon', and whose ambassadors by grace we are, each and all.

As Christ's own ministry was essentially diaconal – he who came not to be served but to serve – so is that of his body, the Church. And if we can speak meaningfully of the priesthood of all believers, then we may speak with no less integrity of the diaconate of all the baptised, including – of course – the clergy.

So, when from this table we rise, renewed in body, mind and soul, let us rise up to serve: for the sake of the Gospel; after the pattern of him whose costly service we see and touch and taste at this and every Eucharist, who lifts us up to the liberty, to the perfect freedom of sacramental service that we see embodied in all our deacons, and especially today in Roxanne's new ministry, on which we pray every blessing.

Laus Deo.

Richard Treloar