

Bishop Stephen Cottrell's Ordination Charge to Deacons, September 2017

"But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you..."

- 1 Timothy 6. 11-13

In John Henry Newman's poem, *The Dream of Gerontius*, as Gerontius' soul comes close to the throne of God his Guardian Angel says to him –

"For one moment thou shalt see thy Lord. One moment; but thou knowest not, my child, what thou dost ask; that sight of the Most Fair will gladden thee, but it will pierce thee too."

Or as we may put it: there is a cost. There is a charge.

I don't know whether any of you were particularly puzzled when you looked at the programme for the Ordination Retreat and saw the title for this evening's session: Ordination Charge. 'What does that mean?' you might have asked. Though alongside other puzzling titles such as the 'Art of Unlearning' and 'Stepping into the Fire' perhaps it seemed admirably clear, though you may have wondered what *sort* of charge is being referred: the Oxford English dictionary offers a plethora of definitions –

- An amount paid for a service rendered or goods supplied
- To store electrical energy
- An accusation
- To be entrusted with a task or duty
- To rush forward in attack

So which charge are we talking about this evening? Is this the time that the diocese is going to hand me the bill for my training and expect a large sum of money in return for being ordained? Have I been accused of something I don't know about, and the ordination isn't going ahead at all? Has it (unsurprisingly) been discovered at the last minute that I am, as I always suspected, not worthy for the task after all. Or am I about to be plugged in?

Or is it all five?

Let's go back to Gerontius, and not worrying about the Roman Catholic view of purgatory which underpins much of the poem, those words, "The sight of the Most Fair will gladden thee, but it will pierce thee too" echo the words that Mary hears from Simeon, that "this child is destined for the falling and the rising of many... and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too." (Luke 2 34-35)

And since as ministers of the gospel we are all 'Christ bearers' then these words also apply to us. There is a cost in ministry, and although it is, of course, right and proper that we draw sensible and professional boundaries around the tasks of ministry, and as I have banged onto each one of you when we have met the instruction, or should I say 'the charge' to have a Sabbath rest is a commandment not just a piece of good advice, nevertheless it is also true that if we wish to share the huge delights of ordained ministry we must also face the sorrows.

So we will find ourselves in impossibly difficult situations: like standing on the doorstep of a couple whose teenage son has died in a car crash, and trying to summon up the courage to knock on the door, let alone find what to say in a funeral homily; or sitting helplessly with a young heroin addict who is asking you for forty quid for the next hit and whom you know may well mug the next person they see if you don't give them the money; or unable to answer the heart searching questions of the person who longs to believe, but can't, and all your theology feels suddenly very useless. And in case you think I'm just making these examples up, they are all things that happened to me in my first couple of years of ordained ministry.

There is great joy in ministry. It is a great adventure. But there is also cost. And not just the difficult pastoral situations, but difficult decisions, and the weight of other people's expectations, the dull apathy of some who do believe, and the hostile rejection from some who don't. And in really dark times the terrible fear that we have wasted our life and our abilities, and the faith that was once so real is drained out of us, nothing but morning mist dissolving in the heat of tortuously difficult and demanding day.

Which is why we need the second charge. To be plugged in. To be loaded. To be filled.

You've heard the horror story of the ordinand who told me that he doubted there would be much time for prayer when he was ordained. Let me remind you what I said to him: 'Why the bloody hell do you think I'm ordaining you at all!'

Our first responsibility as ministers of the gospel is to be people of prayer. It is not that prayer will somehow magically give us the right words in the difficult situations we encounter, but prayer will put us in a right relationship with God so that we know it is not our job to fix things, but often just to walk with people through their joy and sorrow, praying for those who cannot pray themselves or who have no one to pray for them.

And prayer will give us resilience, especially in the dark times, not taking the darkness away, but strengthening our resolve to keep on walking.

And prayer will constantly bring us back to those wellsprings of love where we will know that we are God's beloved and that whatever we face, and whatever the challenges ahead of us, we are here as ministers of the gospel, not because it was our bright idea, but because God has called us.

Yes of course we are unworthy. But he has said the word over us. And we are healed. Your ordination tomorrow is not a passing out parade, not a degree ceremony in which we

announce to the world what a very wonderful person you are, but a sacrament: a fresh anointing by the Spirit for the office and work of a Deacon in the Church.

And I also hope very much that you will be praying with other colleagues in the parish, and encouraging the whole people of God to a discipline of prayer, and teaching them how to pray. Your life as an ordained minister, particularly as a deacon, is to be herald, a living signpost pointing the way to God, and it is by your prayers that you will most fulfil this part of your vocation.

And in this sense you will also be charged, as in being convicted. For you are much more likely to demonstrate the goodness and the beauty of God as we have seen it and received it in Jesus Christ when you yourself are seen to be someone who knows their own need. The evidence in your life that you acknowledge your need of God's mercy will be the greatest gift of your ministry to others and far more compelling than your explanations of how that mercy is made available through Christ's death and Resurrection. So yes, of course, preach and teach about these things, bringing to the proclamation of the gospel your best powers of wit and learning, but never forget that every time you preach the gospel you are preaching it first to yourself. As Lancelot Andrewes said –

“Let the preacher labour to be heard intelligently, willingly and obediently. And let him not doubt that he will accomplish this rather by the piety of his prayers than by the eloquence of his speech. By praying for himself, and those who he is to address, let him be their beadsman before he becomes their teacher; and approaching God with devotion, let him first raise to him a thirsting heart before he speaks of him with his tongue; that he may speak what he hath been taught and pour out what hath been poured in.”ⁱ

Or as our very own Evelyn Underhill has put it –

“Divine renewal can only come through those whose roots are in the world of prayer... We instantly recognise those services and sermons that are the outward expression of the priest's interior adherence to God and the selfless love of souls.”

So this is the other charge: the responsibility you carry, the duty entrusted to you for the gospel itself and for the people of God. As it says in the Ordinal, “Deacons are ordained so that the people of God may be better equipped to make Christ known. Theirs is a life of visible self-giving. Christ is the pattern of their calling and their commission; as he washed the feet of his disciples, so they must wash the feet of others.”

It is a great responsibility, and it will get greater when we all come back next year for your ordination as a priest.

But being a deacon, being a servant and a signpost, must never fade away. Rather, let it be the foundation of the lifetime of ordained ministry that begins for you tomorrow. Always be one who is charged with serving the people of God. And always be one who points to Christ. As Paul charged Timothy: “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life.”

And on the subject of fighting good fights, even though we tend to shun the military language the Bible often uses, there is one final meaning of the word 'charge' that I want to share with you. It means 'advance'... 'rush forwards'.

As deacons in the Church of God here in the diocese of Chelmsford you are all pioneer ministers. Yes, I know that some ordinands have that specific designation and have particular gifts and have received particular training. But I want all of you to be pioneers.

I charge all of you to dream dreams of what this world can be when we march in step with Christ – or perhaps a better image – when we tap our feet to the beautiful rhythm of the gospel and sing that new song that Christ has sung for us. Then we will be hungry and thirsty for justice. Then we will long to share with others the good news of Christ. Then we will find courage to sit at the bedsides of those who are dying, and take that assembly at a local school that hitherto had shunned the church, and learn to laugh at the ridiculous posturing of our different churchmanships, and find that living with conscientious disagreement on all sorts of issues is possible, and start that messy church in the village hall on a Tuesday evening, and visit that couple who have moved into the parish, and spend time resourcing and encouraging the ministry of others, and form that Mission and Ministry Unit with the church next door whose liturgy is different from yours, and, experiencing the joys of ministry, also, still, face the sorrows. And when the darkness gathers find solace and resource in the charge that comes from the Holy Spirit - in the reading of scripture, in the sacrament of the altar, in the silence of waiting.

There is a wonderful scene in Peter Weir's film, *Gallipoli*, depicting events on the night before thousands of young Australian soldiers are to be sent over the top, and where many of them will face certain death. The officer who is in charge at the front line, and who will himself have to lead the assault, sits in his office, not much more than a hollow carved out of the mud, and on a wind-up gramophone listens to a piece of music. Nothing more is said. The camera just lingers on his face. We see him listening intently to the music. We are invited to read his thoughts. For a few moments we get inside what it must be like, not just to be involved in that sort of situation, but to lead others through it.

Its years since I've seen the film, and I can't remember what the music was – I think it was a piece of opera - but in my mind I see him sitting there, contemplating the music, weighing up what lies ahead of him, connecting himself with something beautiful that was beyond and away from the horrors of the First World War.

I suppose you could view this as escapism, as a way of avoiding reality, but I saw it differently. Here is a man charged with terrible responsibility, following orders, but at the same time having to deliver costly orders to others. He sees the madness of it; he feels and holds the pain of it; is trapped and constrained by the choices that others have made; knows what he has to do, but still looks beyond it. Amid the frightful inhumanity and degradation of trench warfare he connects himself to a beauty that must have seem unreachable and yet, at the same time, is one of the few things worth seeking. In those few moments of contemplation he is able to compose himself and discover within himself the resources he needs to lead others. What we see is not the leadership itself, but someone discovering resources to lead others by retreating to a place of stillness and contemplation. In the midst

of the horror he stops. And in stopping is better able to carry out his responsibilities, drawing on resources outside himself.

So – and this really is finally – this is my charge to you – be charged by God. Be constantly reminded and resourced by the beauty of Christ. And just this week I found myself doing the same thing. I had a couple of difficult and fractured days. Stuff was mounting up. People were asking me for things that I couldn't give them. I didn't really want to be the Bishop of Chelmsford any more.

I had a meeting over at Chigwell, so before getting in the car I sorted out some music which for me is beautiful. As it happens, Elgar's setting of *The Dream of Gerontius*. And listening to the music I re-connected with a beauty that is available to us all, that is the deepest truth and a very echo of the life of God: and in this beautiful music also an affirmation of the Christian faith itself. I listened to Act 1 driving over to Chigwell, and Act 2 on the way home. Only it is slightly longer, so on a layby on the A12 I recharged myself and heard the final song of the angel singing to the saved soul,

“Softly and gently, dearly ransomed soul,
In my most loving arms I now enfold thee
And o'er the penal waters, as they roll,
I poise thee, and I lower thee, and hold thee.”

May you too tomorrow, and in all the tomorrows that lay ahead, feel around you the everlasting arms of an ever loving God. May you know that you are loved. Always remember that you are called. And being held by love, charged by love – the love of God made known in Jesus Christ - live and share that love with others. Amen.

+Stephen Chelmsford

ⁱ Lancelot Andrewes, Bishop of Winchester, from 'A Caution before preaching after the example of St Fulgentius' in *Preces Privatae*, 1648.