

# Homily given at the Ordination to the Diaconate of Kyn Barker, May 24, 2009

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First, a word of thanks to Kyn for inviting me to preach on this occasion. I knew Kyn in my childhood, especially during a period when his family rented a house next to mine in Washington DC, sometime in the early fifties. Kyn's Dad, Arthur Barker, was a professor of English and a Milton scholar, and actually taught my Dad, Jack Maybee, as a student of English and Philosophy at Trinity College, Toronto in the late 30s.

I also give thanks for a long association with the incumbent here, Brad Lennon, whose priestly



ministry has also been strongly diaconal and who influenced me so much in my understanding of and commitment to social justice ministry.

“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit... like those waiting for their master to return from a wedding. Blessed are the ones who are

prepared, alert, and vigilant, for when their master returns, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.”

This is an alternate reading for the ordination of a deacon, and I asked for it because it gives a wonderful picture of God’s hospitality, of God’s longing to welcome and serve us, even if everything else dictates that it should be the reverse.

When Kyn and I spoke about today, the first subject that came up was what to wear! Clerical shirt and collar? Cassock, alb, dalmatic, stole? When something important comes up in our life, often our first response is to be properly dressed! Let me say that I think the most important thing we can wear are the garments of baptism – prepared for immersion in the waters of life and death alike, in the life of the Trinity, the God of love and power who surrounds us and fills us with life. Anything else is secondary!

Our primary purpose for gathering here today, then, is to be reminded of God’s longing to give us the kingdom, to fasten his belt, sit us down for a meal, and serve us.

We are also here for another purpose – for Kyn’s ordination to the diaconate. Just to be clear, we’re not making something new of Kyn Barker, for nothing will be superadded to him today that was not already given to him, and to us, at baptism. Rather, we are marking a change in our relationship with Kyn and with one another. We are all restating our commitment to be a servant people. St. Matthew’s is making a commitment to serve this changing community in a new and different way. And we are formalizing our recognition in Kyn as someone who can exemplify to us and lead us in what it means to be servants.

In our baptism, we have all entered fully and equally into the discipleship of Christ. We have all been immersed into the life of the Trinity. We have taken on the priesthood of Christ, offering our lives as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, and receiving grace to be agents of healing and forgiveness in a deeply divided world.

Our presbyters are signs and encouragers of this priestly ministry of reconciliation.

Through our baptism, all of us here have also taken on Christ’s *diakonia*, his servanthood. It’s not just Kyn’s job, but ours, to become ones who serve. (I’ll say more about that in a minute).

There is yet another dimension to our baptismal life. When God pitched a tent among us and became human in the person Jesus, God was emptied of all power and privilege, was humbled and lowered to be among us. In Christ Jesus, he ate among outcasts and sinners, performing what might be called the “towel ministries” or diaconal ministries – cleaning wounds, touching the unclean, wiping away sweat and tears, washing feet.

But he also brought good news in a different way to the wealthy, the powerful, and the privileged. He ate among Pharisees and lawyers too, but when he did so, he challenged them to share their wealth not with people who would be likely to reciprocate, but to invite the poor, the outcast, the lame, and the blind.

In our baptism, we have also taken on the ministry of *episcopo* or oversight – seeing the big picture, ensuring that the rich gifts of God’s creation, the treasures of God’s kingdom, and the wealth of the church, are shared among rich and poor, strong and weak, young and old alike.

Our bishops are signs to us of this ministry of shepherding, balancing, and including.

And so together we have embarked on this journey of discipleship, learning to practice priesthood, service, justice and mercy as Jesus practiced them among us – and in doing so, becoming apostles and evangelists of new life and right relationships.

To help us in this discipleship, the church over the ages has organized its leadership into three orders – bishop, priest or presbyter, and deacon.

Deacons and bishops were among the earliest form of Christian ministers – well before the priesthood emerged as a normative order.

Deacon means simply servant or minister. The origin of the word, we are told, means “through the dust” – the one who leads into new territories, kicking up dust and mess on the way.

By ancient tradition, deacons served as assistants to the bishop, helping in the distribution of alms to the poor, and administration of the eucharistic food to those prevented from joining the assembly of the faithful because of illness, infirmity, or imprisonment.

Their duties in the liturgy corresponded to this ministry. In fact, in ordination the deacon takes on a symbolic role. Like the musical instrument of a cymbal, this symbolic role brings together the

deacon's daily ministry of service with particular liturgical functions, as a way of "making a loud noise" and creating resonance among us, so we don't forget the serving part of our baptism.

Deacons attend the bishop or presider, ensure order in worship, chant the gospel and lead or facilitate the great prayer of the faithful which raises up the needs of the endangered, prisoners and travelers, the sick and the dying, receive the offerings of the people, prepare the table and dismiss the people at the door.

At Easter, the deacon has a special role in announcing the resurrection, having the lamp lit – carrying the Paschal candle, readying us at dawn for the return of the master from the wedding feast.

The verses before the gospel passage we heard to day speak of the kingdom. We so often assume God's kingdom is something that we should deserve or earn, build up, usher in, or spread abroad. We think it won't happen without us. Jesus tells us something different: God's kingdom is something that is God's good pleasure to *give*. Our only part is to make ourselves ready – to detach ourselves from things we own and that own us, and to seek a different kind of wealth; to get dressed for action, turn on the porch light, and keep watch.

Kyn's job is to help us be prepared by his constancy and visibility as one who serves.

God's kingdom does not have boundaries. The only boundaries are the ones we set ourselves. Jesus' words are designed to unsettle his listeners – it's not like you think. All you have to do is let go of your expectations, show up, and be prepared for surprises.

Kyn's job is to proclaim the gospel Sunday by Sunday, surprising us afresh with God's word.

How do we prepare ourselves for surprises? Mostly by the mysterious process of letting go of control and of opening ourselves to receive, which in turn makes us more open to give. St. Matthew's Church is about to experience a great change in your neighbourhood. In the next few years there will be an influx of people from different parts of the world, different faith traditions, different languages, ethnic backgrounds and skin colour. My suggestion is that you prepare yourselves to receive what your new neighbours have to give, to look for treasures in unexpected places, and by so doing create a space for that unexpected generosity which

is a hint that God's kingdom is at hand.

With Kyn as a sign and example, let us all be dressed for action in our baptismal garments, let us all light the lamp of hope and resurrection, let us all await with joy the coming of the master as one who longs to serve us.

Amen.