It feels a long time since Thursday morning when we began to gather together a few miles away from here. 9 about to be deacons, 4 about to be priests, Naomi the ministerial development advisor, Dwayne the chaplain to the retreat, and John & myself, all taking time away from the normal course of things to listen – to ourselves, each other and God. We have stayed in a hotel, inhabiting our own silent spaces in the midst of the hotel’s everyday life – the groups of tourists there to see Stratford, the holiday makers, the business meetings. We have been served by courteous staff who have quietly kept providing trays of pastries, cookies, and drinks – like angels ministering to us, our cups have been running over. And we have prayed in the tiny church in the grounds, stepping into its own ancient history, adding our fingerprints and prayers to the centuries of people’s lives meeting there, hearing the birds maintain their own songs of praise long before we got up and long after we left. And the pool – many of us have rediscovered the welcome unravelling of body and mind as we swam through the waters. ..... And each of us has made our own journey through the days, accompanied by Christ who, just as he did on the Emmaus walk, has drawn alongside, and told our stories back to us so that our eyes could open.

As we have gathered we have inhabited the Eucharist, putting our stories into this liturgy that we share, pondering what it is to be gathered, to be greeted, to tell the truth about our lives in confession and to hear God’s truth about our lives in the words of forgiveness. We’ve explored scripture, the gospel, what an incredible thing it is to share God’s peace, and what we bring in the bread and wine of communion – what we have made of our lives, given to God in the bread; and all the pain and the joys that we experience, poured out to god in the wine.

And it has all been leading up to this, what we are doing here this morning and then this afternoon. Yesterday they all gathered in the tiny church to make their oaths of allegiance to the bishop and they each all spoke out their names – today the bishop will say their names, but yesterday the voice was theirs. It was such an honour to be there, with these extraordinary, ordinary people, who have heard the call of God and are walking this path in response. You may not see it in all the joyful order of today, but it’s an incredibly vulnerable thing that they do. Yesterday the bishop spoke of ministry as a meeting of our humility and God’s humility, and there is a deep truth in that.

But today is not just about them; it’s about all of us. God’s calling is not just to ordination, it’s to each of us in so many different ways of life. And responding to it depends, as our lives do, on God’s blessing. Blessing is when we hold something or someone before God, and God fills it with himself. And afterwards it looks the same but it’s different. Think of the bread that Jesus broke all those years ago, when he spoke those words, this is my body, and gave it away – it looked the same, but it was different. You’ll see it happen again today in our own breaking of the bread here. We bring something ordinary – bread, wine, our own lives – and God transforms them. And so as Tim, Claire, Gail and Rachel are ordained priest, and the nine this afternoon are ordained deacon, they will look the same, but they will be different.

In the gospel, we see some of that happening. This little but huge moment in the life of the world happens towards the end of John’s gospel. It’s after the crucifixion, after the resurrection, in the time of confusion that followed those days. Jesus’ disciples have locked themselves away because they are afraid. They are afraid of the Jews – but remember they are Jews themselves, so we have this sense that they are afraid of their own, even afraid of themselves. They know some of their failures, of course. Peter so aware of his denials, the others so aware of not being there for Jesus at the end. And just afraid that they too may be about to die. So they lock the doors. I wonder what the atmosphere of that house was like.
Some of that awareness of our own frailty and failures has been on the ordinands’ minds over these days. And actually if you are leading a retreat, you are even more aware of your own weaknesses. The recognition of how laughable it is that we are the ones who are ordained continues. If only people knew the truth of what we are really like ….So tempting to lock the doors around us, build up an image of who we are supposed to be and ensure that no one gets to see that inner truth.

Except for one thing. Jesus is not in the slightest bit phased by the locked doors. And he is not the slightest bit phased by his followers’ inadequacies, any more than he is by ours. And the gospel writer doesn’t seem to think it at all odd that he simply turns up in their midst. The doors were locked … and Jesus came in and stood among them. His first word is peace – just as he spoke peace to the raging waves on the Sea of Galilee, so he speaks peace to the raging turmoil of the disciples’ hearts. He knows them – he knows us. Those things about us that we struggle even to articulate to ourselves, he knows it all. And he still calls us. He shows them his wounds – his body, so damaged and abused, so broken. It’s not a new Jesus, it’s the same, crucified Lord. It seems to be the wounds that persuade them who he is – with Mary Magdalene, it was his voice speaking her name. The wounds are so important – it shows us that God doesn’t un-write human history, God takes all of our past, when we dare to give it to him, and weaves it into a new future. The word we use for this is redemption – it’s the mingling of the truth of our lives with the truth of God’s life; a truth that Jesus bore for us and continues to hold.

Back in that locked room, as the disciples begin to understand that Jesus is with them, joy bursts out. And still Jesus speaks peace to them, and it’s not just for them to hold onto for themselves, for there is an even bigger task. He sends them into the world. There is this incredible description – he breathes on them, like God breathing on the waters at the very beginning of creation – a new thing is happening. Jesus breathes the very life of god into the hearts and lungs of these anxious men and women, giving them power to do the work of God in the world. The work that we heard about in the first reading – good news to the oppressed, binding up the broken hearts, proclaiming liberty for the captives, comforting those who mourn, strengthening the faint spirits…… nourishing the people of God that we may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the lord …what a wonderful picture of how the church can be.

This is the work that these about to be priests and deacons are giving themselves to. It’s not their calling alone, it is the calling of God to all of us together. The whole church will depend on them to help us become all that God calls us to be. They will depend on us as they step out in faith today, trusting in the breath of God to sustain them through whatever lies ahead. Today is a moment in time, when the doors that have been locked through fear are held wide open, and Jesus stands in our midst speaking peace, breathing life, and sending Claire, Tim, Gail and Rachel, with us, to play their part in the kingdom of God.