Four days ago a rag tag group of nine prospective deacons, four prospective priests along with their supporters and guides gathered in a beautiful manor house hotel outside Stratford for a few days of retreat and preparation. Those of you familiar with the Christian tradition may be thinking that this doesn’t sound especially ascetic - where were the cold baths and night spent kneeling on frozen floors in front of pale altars? Was this supposed to be equivalent to Christ’s 40 days in the wilderness with the wild beasts, confronting those demons which might assail him later in his ministry?

Well I can tell you that these people - only nine of them are with us now, the rest were fully cooked this morning - have been doing business with God. This last few days do not sit in isolation from the rest of their lives, any more than a honeymoon sits in isolation from the relationship that led to it, and which will follow on from it. (Actually the comparison between an ordination and a wedding has often been drawn, but you could say that one difference is that the fancy holiday in an extraordinary location, feeling slightly nervous, comes before the ceremony in the ordination rather than after it.) It has been special time, a time of reflection and prayer, a time for laughter and some tears, of celebration and quietness. It has been a time for cherishing - at the hands of Naomi, our Diocesan Ministerial Development Adviser, who put in so much work to ensure that the church was beautiful, and the accommodation hospitable - at the hands of one another, as we have spent time together - but above all by God, whose love has drawn each of these special people to give their lives to him in a new way.

For those of you who have travelled with them in life for many years, it will inevitably seem a little strange: for those who are married, how come they are now going through another ceremony in which they promise themselves to someone else? For those whose relationships are those of family member, colleague, friend - will they now become ‘holier than thou’, rather serious, not so much fun to hang out with?

It’s perhaps important to remember that Jesus loved to party. He was not a killjoy at the feast - in fact the evidence is quite the reverse, but that’s to stray back into the wedding illustration. If you don’t know the story, just ask your friend who was just ordained how much water Jesus turned into wine. Whether you are more used to Majestic or Morрисons, neither have anything on this man!

What I really want to talk about, though, is what it means to serve. As we have journeyed together through the ordination retreat since Wednesday morning, we have been following the pattern of the Holy Communion service, what we sometimes call the Eucharist. It means ‘thank you’ in Greek - and if you are lucky enough to get to Greece for your holidays, the waiters will still say ‘efkaristo’ as they accept your tip at the end of a lovely meal in the taverna overlooking the harbour.

As we share in this service this afternoon, we have already received and shared so much from God: the good news of his love in the gospel, the joy of praise, the acceptance and sincerity of prayer, the beauty of this building. We will continue through more prayers, especially for the gift of the Holy Spirit to equip and guide those being ordained deacon today, to tie them into the ministry of Christ and the whole church through all the ages. We will end up in the celebration of holy communion, the gift of God’s love to the world in Jesus Christ, made present and offered to us right here today in bread and wine. (Do receive, by the way, if you want to know God’s love for you today.) There is much for which to say “thank you”.
But sometimes saying thank you isn’t enough: we want to do something. The nine candidates today are to be ordained as deacons. To be ordained - set apart - as a deacon in the church is to be committed to serve, to represent the church’s ministry of service in the world. It is for them to embody the concluding words of the Eucharist service: “Go in Peace, to love and serve the Lord. In the name of Christ, Amen.”

What does it mean to ‘love and serve the Lord’, and how can they find the strength to do it?

If we want to know how to live the life God is calling us to - which, by the way, is the best life any of us can ever hope to live: it’s called following the maker’s instructions! - we are fortunate in having something of a manual. The Bible needs a bit of interpretation, for sure - parts of it were written over 3000 years ago, so you would expect that. But its message is as up to date and relevant as ever. And it has a nasty habit of pulling no punches.

In the Gospel reading today, Jesus is explaining to those listening to him what it means to serve God: it’s simple, he says, if you care practically for God’s children, you are serving me. Jesus tells a number of stories with the same theme - the Good Samaritan is probably the best known example. In this one, Jesus makes it very clear that heaven is for those who have committed themselves to serving those in need - it’s not so much a threat, as a promise … a promise that for those who live their lives in love for those whom Jesus loves, they have started to live in a heavenly way right now, and so that will just continue when they die. We sometimes call it living in the Kingdom of Heaven. If we don’t live our lives in love, we are living away from God … and the consequences of that are serious.

There’s no suggestion in scripture that this is easy - but we are at least told that we will not be on our own. The short reading from St. Paul’s letter to the Romans is about the way that we are part of a team, and that team includes God himself. For those of you being ordained this afternoon, God has called you to this new role, and the church today, in obedience to God, recognises and blesses that calling. God knows what he is up to: so your task is to see yourself as God sees you, and to live that out, alongside others in the church, each living out their own calling. And don’t give up: I love Romans 12.12, an easy Bible reference to remember - Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. At the heart of your calling is the calling to pray, to come again and again before God with the people on your heart. That is the wellspring of your ministry, which of course is not really yours, but Christ’s - he just invites you to be part of it! Part of his team. Giving your heart to those who have Christ’s, and asking him to renew that heart in you every day as you pray and as you serve those to whom he has sent you.

What a privilege it has been to be with you over these past few days, and to have the opportunity to frame some of what God has to say to each of you at this turning point of your lives. Well, perhaps not so much a turning, but a confirming of the direction God has been nudging, pushing, pulling you towards for years. It will from time to time seem more than you can bear, and perhaps more than those who share your lives want to see - but this is the way of abundant Life for you, the way of Jesus which he has called you to follow - a way of living in his love for you and making that way of love known to others, often in deeply practical ways. You are called today to take up a new position in the workforce of his Kingdom - it is an immense privilege and we all promise you our prayers as you prepare to love and serve the Lord … and we all say, ‘In the name of Christ, Amen.’

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.