

The first time I visited this church, some seven years ago, it shut me out! It was a dark winter's evening and the people I was due to meet with were already inside. There was no exterior light and no visible open door. Round and round I went, but to no avail. It was only by dint of a 'phone call on my mobile that I was rescued and welcomed in.

Apparently I was not alone in this experience. The entrance at that time was through a porch at the *back* of the building. Numerous visitors to the church – or rather, the ones who made it in to tell the tale – commented on how difficult it was to discover the entrance, how awkward the steps were, and how wet one got having to go outside to reach the hall for coffee after the service.

Now the congregation of St John the Evangelist knew that all this went against what they were meant to be about. Their very name calls them to be people who spread the good news by word, deed and sign, not put up barriers that exclude. And so they devised a range of ways of making access to their building easier and their premises more user-friendly; 'making their church more inviting', to coin a phrase. *Project Welcome* was conceived in 2003 and brought to birth in 2007. And we today have a chance to admire the fruits of those four years of hard work. To my mind, the highlight of the project is the West doorway, those two beautiful glass doors engraved by David Gulland, a glass artist and member of this congregation, doors which opened automatically as we approached this afternoon, welcoming us all in. And if you haven't had a chance over lunch to admire them close up and look at the ecumenical symbols engraved on them, do take time to do so after this service.

Those doors welcome people in and, being glass, they also allow people *outside* to see what's going on *inside* the building. Indeed, just a few months ago, I was passing St John's on *another* winter's evening, this time on a bus from Castle Douglas. There were lights on inside the church and from the bus I could see right inside the building. It was a beautiful and inviting glimpse of the extraordinary in the midst of a very ordinary journey.

These doors, then, are signs of welcome, making the *inaccessible* accessible and that which has hitherto been *invisible* to outsiders, visible.

The *diaconal ministries* that you are engaged in do likewise; you too are 'doors to the sacred', liminal people whose task it is to enable others to meet Jesus more easily, through worship, word or care. "*One day as Jesus was teaching, people tried to bring a friend forward and lay him at Jesus' feet*"

People today are also trying to '*reach Jesus*', longing to reach him - for **teaching**: to hear some word that speaks to their situation, a word of challenge or transformation, a word of advice and revelation. People are trying to reach him – for **healing**: to feel his care and his compassion in their sorrow, anxiety or illness, and to be made whole again. People are trying to reach him - for his **sacramental touch**: to experience tangible signs of the Transcendent whether by means of anointing or walking a labyrinth, the scent of incense or the music of Taizé; to make that vital connection with the life of the soul in the midst of a consumerist world.

And yet they find that they can't 'reach Jesus' *because the crowd gets in the way* – and remember that the crowd in our story was formed of God-fearing people who wanted to hear Jesus. Even today, the God-fearing institution itself can get in the way of Jesus: the Church has bound Jesus in as many bandages as Lazarus was wrapped in, bandages of language or creed, protocol or tradition. Bandages of behaviour and dress, accent and education.

Diaconal ministers stand on the boundaries and make access to Jesus easier. **Readers and Worship Leaders** read, teach and preach Jesus' words in ways and in accents that all can understand, unwrapping the bandages of arcane language and proclaiming the good news in such a way that 21st century folk can understand the message and see its relevance for their own lives today. They lead worship in such a way as to 'make the secret plain', as Paul puts it to the Colossians. **Pastoral Assistants** go *outwards* from the building, reaching out to the lonely and the housebound, the sick and the sad, mediating Jesus' care and compassion in practical ways; breaking through the roof of all that stands in the way of people accessing Jesus' healing touch. They '*use opportunities to the full*', to use Paul's words, sensitively responding to each person they meet. And together with **Eucharistic Assistants** they enable the distribution of Holy Communion in such a way that all may be included in the feast, regardless of age, infirmity or distance.

All these diaconal ministries are ways of '*providing an opening for the Gospel, of proclaiming the secret of Christ*', to use Paul's words again, of making the good news of the Kingdom really present today.

Diaconal ministries are awesome ministries. Much hangs on them, much that we are unaware of. We find ourselves being channels, conduits of God's grace.

Listen again to the Gospel:

There was a man that was paralyzed. Some men carried him on a mat. The men tried to bring him and put him down before Jesus. But there were so many people that the men could not find a way to Jesus. So they went up on the roof and lowered the paralyzed man down through a hole in the ceiling. They lowered the mat so that the paralyzed man was lying before Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the sick man, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

Their faith. What if they had given up at the first hurdle; had seen the crowd and said to their chum, "well, we can't possibly battle our way through all this lot so we'll just take you home again.".... Jesus saw *their* faith, *their* trust in his ability to do something for their friend, *their* dogged determination to get their friend through at all costs - so *he* said to the sick man, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

There are times when the preparation required to lead worship or preach a sermon seems more than we can cope with, when the last thing we want to be doing is bestirring ourselves sufficiently to visit someone in a residential

home or paying close attention to a repeated story. But that is just what we are called to do! I read an account this past week of someone in the Diocese who had gone to take communion to an elderly couple who lived far from the church; the journey took 45 minutes by car. En route he questioned what a time-and-motion study would have made of this ministry and seriously doubted its efficacy - that is, until he got there and was met by the couple who fell upon him saying, "we don't see people very often".

Diaconal ministries are crazy, arduous ministries because they are about sacrificial service. As crazy, arduous and sacrificial as heaving a fully-grown man on a pallet onto a roof, or washing twelve pairs of dusty feet.

Paul knew how this felt. He knew how it felt for the new Christian sisters and brothers at Colossae struggling to live out their vocations in that multicultural milieu with its competing belief systems; knew, too, just how burdensome his own ministry felt at that juncture, consigned as he was to a prison at Ephesus. And Paul also knew that the one thing that would sustain both the Colossian Christians and himself in those ministries - was **prayer**: fervent, frequent, faithful prayer, prayer that uses both head and heart, intelligent prayer, thankful prayer. Their ministries and his depended on it - just as all diaconal ministry depends on it. To fulfil such a task is not in human power but depends upon the grace of God to whom we need to pray constantly.

And **that** is why we are gathered here today. This liturgy is an act of recommitment on *your* part to that ministry of prayer which alone can give you the capacity to discern openings for the gospel and to serve as channels of God's power. It is a reminder, too, to those congregations from which you come to include your ministry in their Intercessions on a regular basis. But this service is also an earnest of the **Diocese's** ongoing commitment to pray for you and to uphold your work before God – now and in the year to come.

And so today we give thanks to God for your faithful ministries, asking that you *'may persevere in prayer, with minds alert and with thankful hearts'*. May you be openings for the Gospel and doors to the sacred, *'proclaiming the secret of Christ'* by your lives, your words and your service. And may the Lord who has called you to this work and given you the will to undertake it, also give you grace to perform it, now and always.

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen