

**Sermon preached by The Right Reverend Christopher Foster
at the Service of Installation and Welcome of him as the ninth Bishop of Portsmouth
Saturday 18 September 2010, Portsmouth Cathedral**

We are here as disciples of Jesus Christ. That simple truth is not always an easy, comfortable or straightforward claim to make or profession by which to live, but it is central to who each one of us is, and to what we seek to be and to do. And whatever office we hold or job we do, it is our shared calling, and the greatest vocation we can seek.

So, as I thank you today for the welcome you offer me, I come among us as your bishop as a fellow disciple of Jesus Christ.

As I have written in the service booklet, Sally and I, with Richard and Miriam, are so encouraged by your presence and support here today from across the diocese, from its communities and parishes, representing so widely both the life of its people amongst who we live and work in this county and on the Island, and also the witness of the Christian church in the Church of England and other denominations. We are grateful too for those – family, close friends and colleagues – from further afield who can be here; thank you. The senior clergy of St Albans ‘gave me away’ as I entered; no transfer fee, just as well given Pompey’s financial plight, and perhaps with the relief of a bride’s father who wants her out of his hair. They represent, as my most recent colleagues and friends, the very many people and clergy who have shaped my life and ministry and to whom I owe so very much. You will have noticed that I did not knock on the great west doors. Though I apologise for the lack of drama, the open door is a powerful symbol of what I have learned from fellow disciples, that the church like the gospel is to be freely available to all comers – just as the doors were opened wide even to a new bishop - and much else in this service speaks of a Lord who welcomes everyone as you have welcomed us. As we shall sing, “God’s love embraces all...the doors are open wide: share God’s good gifts – let no one be denied.”

Many cannot be here and, as perhaps you know, I am greeting them this weekend in a DVD for parishes, also to be available on the web along with highlights of this service – so none of the sermon then, one friend suggested! We are reminded to be as imaginative and bold as we can in reaching out, using the best of our opportunities to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. I have mentioned already our hope that this service speaks powerfully but not aggressively about the gospel, the church and our shared privilege as disciples. In preparation there has been a lot of conversation about what to call this occasion. Traditionally it’s an enthronement, but that sounds rather grand and regal; inauguration sounds pretentiously presidential; installing me makes me feel like a satellite dish. Each has its merits, though. I am today given my seat, put in my place with its obligations and responsibilities. A new phase in the life of this diocese, its parishes and chaplaincies does begin for us all. I am called, though unworthy, to leadership but as shepherd and Father in God. Together we mark a fresh stage in our common life, seeking the grace as well as the gifts of the Spirit for the tasks and the joys ahead.

As disciples we long to give our best for the kingdom of God. That great vision begins in the small things – words and actions that we do. Today’s bible readings remind us of the pattern of discipleship which will sustain our best energies and offering:

humility
service, and
generosity

A new diocesan bishop, preaching an installation sermon such as this, is often encouraged to lay out a sort of strategic plan with targets and measurable outcomes; a spiritual business plan. I believe that we must, every one of us individually, and also collectively and corporately as a diocese and church, first look to the integrity and quality of discipleship. To be humble, to serve, to be generous, is the basis of our desire to live a loving Christian life after the pattern and example of Jesus Christ. Of course we shall look for things to happen as we pray and work for the vitality of Christian service, for the growth of congregations, the deepening of faith, the fostering of vocations from flower arranging to bellringing, from street pastoring to the religious life as a nun or monk; as God calls people to be churchwarden, Reader, priest and a myriad of vocations through worship, prayer and sheer hard work. Let us never be less than wholeheartedly committed to the often demanding ministry of being partners of God, in the name of Jesus, through the prompting of the Spirit.

Earlier this week, keeping Holy Cross Day, we have focussed on Jesus offering himself for us not partially or grudgingly, nor with caveat or restraint or reservation. He emptied himself... “he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” You and I are called to model our lives on his humility; none of us is too grand, too important, too clever, too wealthy, too anything to be exempt. Indeed those of us with privilege or responsibility are to be particularly attentive to this Christ-like quality. Saint Paul, writing to Philippians, as Sally read, invites us to seek salvation ‘with fear and trembling.’ “Do not be vain, my soul,” wrote Saint Augustine, “even you have to listen.” I may be your bishop, but I have a soul to be saved as well. Pray that we are spared the world’s preoccupation with the superficial, preferring the status of integrity and simplicity.

The Gospel reading powerfully records Jesus own words about service. They are sharp words – and how he must have himself felt their implication with real foreboding – and they compel us to remember that the Christian life of discipleship makes demand. It will call us to give up or let go of what we cherish, to go not where we’d chose, to bear the cost and price of serving others interest and welfare rather than our own comfort or security. ‘Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant.’ As you know how much you have received and enjoy, be profoundly and fundamentally people who offer themselves. Jesus, in the gospel reading, warns us not to be like tyrants, and the hymn reminded us that our service is not on our terms but God’s; “we make his love too narrow by false limits of our own; and we magnify his strictness with a zeal He will not own.”

Humility, service, and thirdly, generosity of heart and word - and deed, and purse or pocket, time and talent, generosity of everything. The account of the healing of blind Bartimaeus is a favourite of mine, because the story depends on some unknown and un-named people in a crowd who look to the interests of another. You can imagine Bartimaeus' confusion, anxiety and frustration, perhaps even his desperation, as he shouts out to the Jesus he cannot see. While some try to restrain his enthusiasm, others, we read, say to him, "Take heart.... Jesus is calling you." How we need, each of us and together, to be generous enough to encourage and to say 'take heart' to the perplexed, the questioning and the sceptical, as well as those who gingerly test the possibility of Christian ministry. How heartened we are today that, though Bishop Kenneth and Sarah cannot alas be here, we welcome with affection Bishop Ronald and Bishop Timothy whose example and friendship means so much to many in Portsmouth and to me. The diocese and I are conscious of our inheritance and, over this past year, deeply grateful for the very valued ministry of Bishop Ian as commissary, and we thank him and Penny for their generosity.

Generosity, service and humility are marks of Jesus – and these same qualities should identify our discipleship. Lives with these qualities are not desirable for the spiritual well-being of Christians and the ministry of the church; they are necessary, not optional extras. They betray our faithfulness. To be faithful sounds dull and dutiful; let's recall that faithfulness to God is our Christian way of life – vital, engaging and creative. May our lives be never less than that, grace- and Spirit-filled.

There is a story often told in our family of Julia, my first wife, setting a class of primary school children an educational but not too demanding task one Friday afternoon at the end of a very demanding week for her 7-year olds. "Devise, she said, "the menu for a café, or a school lunch, or a motorway service area or park kiosk, some eating place." Before too long a hand went up and Charlotte, I'll call her, asked how to spell Margo. "Oh" Julia replied, "are you doing the menu for a trucker's stop, Margo's Café?" Charlotte raised her eyes to the heaven, sighed with exasperation, and wearily explained, "It's a restaurant menu and I'm doing the wine list. Chateau Margaux!"

God forbid that we set our sights too low and expect less than we might of each other, and of God. Jesus shows us a life, not a dirge or a moan, a life of faithfulness to God in humility, service and generosity. We are called to give our best too. We shall find this transforming of our selves, of our churches, of our communities. What an outcome that would be: deeper faith and worship, engaged and engaging ministry reaching out in mission to God's precious people.

So, my new friends and colleagues, lay people, clergy, Readers, community leaders – my dear fellow disciples – take heart. I honour your ministries and every way in which you engage in the mission of God. I urge us to be humble – for you and I know the frailty of our humanity and our need of healing and salvation; I invite you to take the mantle of service in God's strength – for we know that His yoke is easy and burden light. I ask you to be people of generosity who support rather than criticise, and who encourage and give hope - for God has chosen you and me, and calls us.

Take heart!

Christopher Portsmouth: