

**The 5th Sunday of Easter (Year A): “God’s House”: sounds too fanciful?
1st Reading: Acts 6:1-7: Deacons ‘invented’ for a down-to-earth purpose;
2nd Reading: 1 Peter 2:4-9: All are a “holy priesthood”, with a sacred role;
Gospel; John 14: 1-12: “Many rooms in God’s house” – meaning what?**

I was ordained deacon in July, 1970 (6 months after my 22nd birthday), and the 15 months I spent as a deacon before being made a priest was one of the most useful periods of my life. Although still a student, I could work in parishes - doing sick communions, baptizing and preaching. But the origin of the diaconate (see the first reading) was not exotic: the apostles were so busy that they had no time to sort out a dispute between the different groups in the Church over the running of a sort of ancient food-bank. Seven men were ordained (‘had hands laid on them’ in old language) as deacons to minister this practical help. However, they soon acquired more spiritual roles: specifically, in preaching & teaching the faith. In the 1960’s, the diaconate was restored as a full-time order in the Church, to carry out those duties, plus Baptizing, giving out Communion and the conducting of non-Eucharistic marriages & funerals.

The 2nd reading is one of the most important (and beautiful) in the New Testament. St Peter is talking about the status of baptized Christians: we are ALL members of “the holy priesthood that offers the spiritual sacrifices that Jesus Christ has made acceptable to God”. Peter wants us to be “living stones making up a spiritual house”. Leaving aside the ordained clergy for the moment, it is worth stressing the importance of this “priesthood of all believers”. Every one of you reading this (and who is baptized) has a share in this call to build up God’s “house” – his presence & influence through the Church. We do this by how we live our lives in the world: our good example is one of the ways we praise God and worship him. If we try to lead a good life (and remember – none of us are perfect!) then, in Peter’s lyrical words, we are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a holy people”. That sounds sublime to me. Deacons & priests are taken from the community for specific aims: priests are set apart, to be the instruments of God’s sacraments in the church’s worship.

The gospel is taken from the long talks Jesus gave at the Last Supper, just before his arrest. Experts call these the “farewell discourses” – in effect, a sort of long goodbye. He had warned the disciples of his betrayal and arrest, and they were very upset – they (especially Peter) still couldn’t grasp that he had to suffer as part of God’s plan. This gospel passage follows that shock. He told them that their hearts should not be ‘troubled’ – horrified by the thought of his

arrest and death – instead, they needed to trust in God and in Jesus himself. That was easier said than done! Then came his mention of the ‘rooms in his Father’s house’. It’s hard to make clear sense of this. To Jews, of course, the ‘Father’s House’ was the Jerusalem temple – but with Jesus about to be the new sacrifice (on the cross), its days were numbered. Early Christians felt that the phrase meant life after death, with God in Heaven, and that Jesus was promising them a place in Paradise. That’s certainly possible, and makes sense, in view of what he said next – he would come back, to take them to Heaven with him.

Another idea is to see it as Jesus’ presence in the Church after his resurrection. (St Paul & St Peter saw the Church as God’s ‘house’: Jesus its ‘head’; we its ‘body’.) This interpretation suggests we have many different ways of being part of God’s ‘household’ – of serving Christ. Some are purely spiritual; others, more practical. We are all part of that same household – even if some are not linked sacramentally with it as much as we could be, or should be.

The other famous phrase in this gospel was when Jesus called himself “the Way, the Truth and the Life”. This was to answer a question about where Jesus was going. (The penny still hadn’t dropped!) Note the capital letters – these were not just descriptions of Jesus – they were how he saw himself in relation to us. He is **the Way**: our source of information, and guide to the direction of travel; **the Truth**: the guaranteed and reliable showing of God’s revelation to us, because he is God’s eternal Word made Flesh; **the Life**: what he shared with his Father as God, he will also share with us – so we can become one with (but not equal to) God. No other religion could offer that.

Philip still wasn’t satisfied – he wanted physical proof (like us, perhaps?). Jesus said Philip needed faith to accept that He & the Father shared a common divine life, so that Jesus’ actions & words were actually the Father at work through him. Anyone who had faith could carry on Jesus’ work after he had left.

If you’ve read this far, without switching off, well done! The point of this complex gospel passage is that Jesus’ death & resurrection changed everything about our relationship with God. The Old Testament obsessions - the Jerusalem Temple and our human successes (and failures) - were effectively cancelled out. Jesus replaced all that with a new scheme: what we need now is faith, and with that, a willingness to serve God and each other in love, copying Jesus himself. That done, we’re promised a place in God’s “house”, even if we’re not perfect. To me, that offers real hope, so let’s keep our spirits up! *Fr Jim Dunne.*

