

Seven

The episode described in the Acts of the Apostles in today's first reading was long thought to be a description of the institution of the diaconate as an order in the Church; hence depictions of St Stephen in medieval and renaissance art, always show him wearing the dalmatic, the outer vestment of the deacon. Exegetes are now not so sure about the passage, and they speak more often of this episode in Acts as being more akin to episcopal rather than diaconal faculties. However whatever the truth, it is interesting to note the linkage between bishop and deacon to the degree that a photograph of Pope Francis taken during the washing of the feet on Maundy Thursday showed him wearing a diaconal stole as opposed to an episcopal/priestly one.

Be that as it may, and whatever the origins of the diaconate, its presence amongst us as a symbol emerges from the action of Jesus at the Last Supper and from his command to us all to copy what he has done. The deed itself was not particularly innovative but what was profound was the meaning which flowed from it by virtue of the fact that it was Jesus himself who carried it out. I think that the reality of this act must sit at the heart of every Christian community whether that community be the largest or the smallest. Similarly this understanding of the demonstrable putting into practice and the living out of this act of Christian love must be present in all its depth in our families as well if our faith and its relevance is to speak to others as well as to ourselves.

You may or may not look to prophetic symbols to gladden the heart, but when the Social Committee met last week, seven people came along to reflect and consider the future of our own charitable and fund raising work in the parish. We are all thinking about what the future might hold for us, yet it was deeply reassuring and encouraging to know that people are still intent on offering their service by placing themselves at the disposal of the parish to continue the work of raising funds and thus ensure that the gospel imperative of charity continues to attract such commitment and dedication from you all both by your active participation in the life of the parish and in the way you always respond.

The 'Seven' in Acts were tasked with duties which exemplify the necessary but sometimes unnoticed jobs which happen. Can seven become fourteen or more? Should we ask ourselves the question how can I become more involved in acting out my own baptismal calling within the parish? Is there anything I can offer to do however small? Every act of Christian love is replete with the reality that it is initiated by the Holy Spirit and filled with gift of the Father's grace made present in the world by and through the life of Jesus. His words to us in the gospel today whoever believes in me will perform the same works as I do myself must be our encouragement that we will as he says go on to perform even greater works.

What these works may be are unknown to us but as Jesus says they remain in the Father's hands, and it is therefore to the glory of the Father that we move forward in love and service. The work of diakonia is elemental to who we are, and we all therefore metaphorically wear the dalmatic. Perhaps the medieval and renaissance artists got it right when they put the dalmatic on Stephen, because if you read on in Acts you realise that Stephen becomes an image of Christ in his witness to the world, and that is a challenge for us all.