



**ARCHDEACONRY OF OAKHAM**

**THE ARCHDEACON'S CHARGE**

**TO**

**CHURCHWARDENS**

**2023**

It is a delight once more to have the privilege of delivering a 'charge' to the Churchwardens. There is something particular about a 'charge' the Bishop delivers one to those being ordained and Archdeacons to Churchwardens each year. It is essentially a sermon to a particular group of people with a particular calling and is about the application to that calling as it is to be lived out.

So for those of you who are not Churchwardens – I'm sorry but I hope that by virtue of being here you are involved in supporting or working with wardens in their particular calling.

It is then not a surprise that our readings reflect a sense of call, both Old and New Testament give us accounts of God calling, but calling to what?

On both occasions it is connected to a call to follow and to be sent. These readings might more commonly be associated to a calling of Evangelists or to Ministry so are they appropriate to Churchwardens? Isn't the role of a Churchwarden all about buildings? Well I'd say only in the same way the Archdeacon's role is all about drains!!

Buildings (and indeed drains) are very important, they are important though as part of the whole story of our calling as the whole people of God, our churches are the home of God, the home of God's people, they are in a way exactly what our own homes are to us as individuals, it's the brick that roots us in our place and although it is possible to live a nomadic and homeless life most of us would not wish to do so!

We as the people of God are not homeless, we are rooted in place and yet we are also a people who are sent and called to a new place, a place where we will find God has gone before us and so we arrive to find God already at work.

The famous passage from Isaiah gives us a clear example of a human characteristic we may all be familiar with, Isaiah on 'seeing' God is instantly aware of his own inadequacy 'I, a man of unclean lips' yet an angel with coal gives assurance of sin 'wiped out' and so Isaiah utters the familiar words "Here I am. Send me"

Matthew's telling of Jesus calling of both Peter and Andrew, James and John, gives us the famous words "follow me and I will make you fishers of people".

So how do these two phrases connect to the Churchwardens?

I believe that we are all part of the people of God, called to share the good news of Jesus to each generation, and that within that each of us may be called to something different, when we respond 'here am I, send me' it is to the call of God as it relates to us. Each of you has, either for the first time or for a number of years (sometimes a significant number) has replied to God's "I need a Churchwarden" – "here am I, send me"

Wardens are those who care for the house of God in terms of the physical building but also for the family of God who share this home, our Wardens share in the leadership of God's people, alongside the other ministries of Reader, Evangelist, Pastoral callings, Deacon's and Priest's, Churchwardens are leaders, they are Officers of the Bishop.

Wardens also have the privilege of being those who lead the people in prayer, Wardens by virtue of their office can lead Morning and Evening prayer, those who have prayer as part of their calling have always been at the heart of our leadership. Like Lydia who was found by the river, in a place that Luke, in the book of Acts, describes as a place 'where we expected to find a place of prayer'.

Lydia then opens up her own home to the leaders of God's people, it is Lydia's house that becomes the place where the believers meet.

Perhaps Lydia led prayer, or like most of our Wardens perhaps she looked after the house in which they met and someone else led the prayers, yet she remained a person of prayer.

This is a challenge to you as Wardens, whether you lead Morning and Evening prayer or not your role is to both care for the building and to be a person of prayer within the household of God.

There are those who work alongside you in this task, at last year's admitting services I spoke about the difficulty which had been expressed around the DAC support you were receiving and that the office was understaffed, I am delighted that there is another member of staff there now and although things are not utterly transformed there has been some significant improvement and we will continue to see that improvement I hope so that you as Wardens are supported in your particular role in this area.

I am very much aware that it is you as Churchwarden's who have seen a significant increase in responsibility (alongside my significant workload increase) with regard to our vacancies. In my first year I have been involved with 22 of these, so for the significantly more than 22 sets of Wardens (due to multi-parish benefice's being most of those vacancies) I am very grateful.

Working alongside you to create Benefice profiles, keep the PCC's informed, plan the interview processes and finally, delightfully, to make the announcement of a new appointment is a privilege and delight. Each time we make an announcement we are seeing another person respond to the call of God, another follow Jesus invitation, another having said to God "here I am, send me".

Last year I spoke about the role of Churchwardens in ensuring that our Churches are safe spaces for everyone, it is not always an easy thing to do, ensuring that we as God's people take every action (even the ones that cause us extra work) to make sure that our Christian responsibility to have good safeguarding processes, to take note of any concern, no matter how small, to hear the voices of children and the vulnerable so that we can be places that bring the peace and security of knowing every person matters as one created in the image of God, that nobody will be able to hide in plain sight, because our Churches will be places where we listen and care and where we don't ignore or say 'that could never happen here' – as Wardens alongside those who work with Children and Young People and all others licensed by the Bishop, have a share in this responsibility.

Our churches will be safer places, that communicate the love of God for all people, regardless of any distinguishing factors, when we all work together on this and each take our own responsibility seriously.

We have spoken about calling and responding but for this to happen it does first require a focus on listening.

Churchwardens are often the person in the community that people trust and confide in, the skill of listening carefully is one that Wardens need to continually develop. As I have reminded my family on many occasions 'hearing' is not the same as 'listening'. We can hear what is being said in the mechanical understanding of that word, our ears can hear the words, are we listening though? Are we paying attention to how those words are said? What is not being said? Are we listening to the silence as well as the speech? Are we understanding the whole story?

So often when I am in a Benefice it is the wisdom of Churchwarden's that help me to really listen rather than just hear the words and assume I know what they mean!

Churchwardens keep listening please.

Keep listening to God who calls you, keep listening to the people you serve, keep listening to the quiet voices, the silent or background people, those outside the Church congregation and each other for none of us undertakes this calling alone.

Like Isaiah we are all sinful people.

Like Peter and Andrew, James and John we are capable of leaving everything and following, getting it absolutely right and also, as we know from the later Gospel stories, absolutely wrong!

Like Lydia we are to be people of prayer and hospitality. We are called and sent but not alone, alongside those in our Benefice and in our wider Diocese, together as the people of God but you as Churchwardens with your own particular calling, we serve our God of love in the place and places we belong.

So I want to say thank you. Thank you to all of you who have served as Churchwardens for the last year, some of you for many years, thank you to those of you who are stepping into this role for the first time, thank you for being willing to make this response and take up this ancient office so that this generation, every generation, may know something more of the God who loves us.

In just a moment I will ask you all to stand and to make the declaration as Churchwardens, a declaration in which you affirm before God and God's people here...

That you will indeed discharge those duties in your parish and most importantly that you will call 'at all times' on the 'strength that God gives' – Churchwardens you are called by God and as 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 reminds us "the one who calls is faithful" that strength is made available to you at all times and in all places – make sure that you call upon it!

Amen.

So if I can now ask all of the Churchwardens to stand....

Together please will you make the declaration as it is in our service sheet....