

**SERMON AS DELIVERED AT THE INSTALLATION  
OF THE RT REVD DONALD ALLISTER  
AS BISHOP OF PETERBOROUGH  
17 April 2010**

Alleluia, Christ is risen. **He is risen indeed. Alleluia.**

I want to say a few words of thanks:

- to all of you for coming today
- to those who have worked so hard in many ways preparing for today
- to those who have worked hard looking after the diocese during Bishop Ian's illness and since his death.

Thank you.

A moment of prayer.

*Mighty risen Lord, speak to us from your word we pray. Amen.*

Do you love me? Feed my lambs.  
Do you love me? Tend my sheep.  
Do you love me? Feed my sheep.

That was the risen Lord Jesus addressing Simon Peter: 'Feed my sheep'. I asked for those words to be inscribed on my personal crozier, and I discovered this morning that the same text is also inscribed (in smaller lettering and in Latin) on the Diocesan Crozier which will feature at the end of this service. "Feed my sheep".

This City and this Diocese of Peter-borough have the rare privilege of being named after an Apostle of Christ, and this Cathedral also counts Peter as the first of its three patron saints. So for many reasons it's right to focus today on the Lord's commissioning of Peter.

I am grateful for those who over the years have gently fed me, tended me and continue to do so. Those people who have shepherded me have been clergy and lay, women and men, bishops and children. We are all part of this. We can all rejoice in the ministry and privilege Christ has given us of feeding and caring for people in the pasture of his church. The commission which Jesus gave Peter to feed his sheep is not for Peter alone and not for bishops alone, but through Peter for the whole Church of God. We are all to care for and feed Christ's sheep. We are all to exercise the ministry which Christ committed to Peter.

Of course, the Peter who was called to shepherd the flock was an unworthy sinner. That question 'Do you love me?' asked three times is a painful reminder to Peter of the way he had denied Jesus three times the night before the crucifixion. None of us is worthy to serve Christ or to serve his people, but his grace covers our failings, his shed blood pays the price, his Spirit equips us and his gentle powerful voice calls us to nurture his sheep.

The sheep we care for, are not ours, but his. 'Feed **my** sheep' he says. Parishioners do not belong to the vicar, new converts do not belong to the evangelist, the people of a diocese do not belong to a bishop. The universal church does not belong to Peter. 'Feed **my** sheep'. There is a real temptation here for clergy and for bishops: to think of **my** people, **my** church, **my** diocese. Peter was not immune to that: he went on a few minutes later to ask Jesus about the future, the destiny, of another follower. Jesus' answer, paraphrased by me, is 'Mind your own business:

you are a shepherd but they are **my** sheep not yours.’ We clergy need to hear that. ‘Feed **my** sheep.’

The food with which we are to feed Christ’s sheep is of course primarily Christ himself. Jesus spoke of this at some length in another chapter of John’s gospel. It is up to the clergy and all the church to ensure that God’s people are fed on Christ, that we receive him, that we hear of him through the word, that we receive him at the Lord’s table, that we are washed by him in baptism, and that again and again we are nourished on Christ the living word of God: so that we have each one a personal relationship with him as friend and brother as well as Lord and Master.

Rather unusually today I am preaching from this seat, the Cathedra, the Bishop’s teaching chair. A cathedral is called that after its cathedra, the teaching seat of the Bishop. It is my primary task as it is the clergy’s primary task to teach God’s word and thus to feed the sheep. And for me that focuses down especially to the privilege of nurturing and caring for the clergy and the other ministers and leaders of Christ’s people. So: clergy, readers, pastoral ministers, evangelists, churchwardens, PCC members, and all those who serve and lead Christ’s people, you are especially in my care. I have a particular responsibility for you, for your nurture and wellbeing, your growth in Christ.

I wish to be accessible to you, I wish to get around, I will get around the Diocese. I want to be seen and known. I want people to be able to approach me, and I want to be where you are in your parishes, your places of worship, if you will invite me in your homes, your places of work, your places of leisure and recreation. I want to get to know you and to hear about your concerns and your hopes. I want to bring Christ among you into every part of your lives. That’s not just for the clergy: it’s for all people of God.

This is a large Diocese and geographically quite an odd shape with Peterborough at one end of it. I have already arranged that one day a week I will be working from Bouverie Court in Northampton so that I can be available to people in the southern half of the Diocese more easily, a bit more accessible to folk, to clergy and to lay people. Please take advantage of that: please clergy and lay people, if you want to see me and Northampton is easier for you than Peterborough, let us know; we’ll make it possible.

But my role of feeding, nurturing and caring for the people of God isn’t restricted to the church. It’s for the whole of this Diocese, for the whole county of Northamptonshire, the county of Rutland as well as the City of Peterborough. I look forward to that. It means I’ll be on the road, I’ll be travelling, I’ll be meeting lots of people. I’ll be wanting to meet those in positions of influence and responsibility, I’ll be equally wanting to meet ordinary people, I’ll be wanting to come and be part of your community. That’s important for me.

I’ll also be wanting to meet and work and pray with leaders of sister Christian churches. I have already met some of those and begun to strike up friendships. May that continue and prosper. We are called to be one church and to witness as one church to one Lord Jesus Christ. Christian leaders who are here today from other churches: you are most welcome. I look forward so much to getting to know you better and working with you, so that together we can shepherd God’s people.

And I want to go further. It’s not just leaders of other Christian denominations I want to get to know and be friends with; it’s leaders of other faiths. Now, of course, we have differences in our understanding, as we do for example between the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church. And with other faiths those differences are much greater. We as Christians believe that

Jesus Christ is the Son of God, fully man and fully God, human and divine. And we as Christians believe that Jesus is the Saviour and is for all people. We are not afraid of saying that. As Christians we need to be more and more confident that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. But when we say that and when we are grateful for and proud of our Christian heritage we do not intend to threaten those of other faiths. We want to preach the risen Jesus Christ graciously, in a way that reaches out with love and affection to all people.

We want to build harmony in our society. We want to help local authorities and the police and other community leaders to foster good relations between different communities, different ethnic groups, different religious groups. We want the very best community relations, the best friendships, the best respect for one another. As we approach a General Election we want to insist that all people are made in the image of God and should be respected, accepted and loved for Christ's sake.

Together as people of faith we want to stand for the importance of faith and the importance of the spiritual dimension in our lives, our communities, and in our national life. We won't do that by compromising our beliefs. When I meet the leaders of other faiths I intend to be crystal clear that Jesus Christ is my Saviour and I would like him to be their Saviour; but I intend also to be totally respectful to my fellow faith leaders: to hear them, to care for them, to show them God's love and to stand together with them for the wellbeing of our communities. Please pray for me and pray for the leaders of other faiths in this Diocese that we can be seen and known as friends, respecting one another, listening to one another, talking together while at the same time standing firm for our different beliefs.

People have already started asking me about my vision for the Diocese of Peterborough. It's a bit early for that yet. I have a lot of listening and a lot of learning to do because I want to lead the church in a way that is right for this part of the country at this particular time. But some early pointers may help; they come very much from this biblical idea of God's people being called to shepherd his sheep. They come too from the charge that the Archbishop of Canterbury has given me.

First, I don't believe the decline in churchgoing, which we have seen in recent years, is inevitable or necessary. I believe it can and should and will be reversed. I believe the church should be growing in numbers as well as in commitment and in effectiveness in society. I will work and pray to those ends, that the church may be a growing church, a vibrant church, a powerful and effective church for God in our world. Please don't misunderstand me. I don't want clergy or others to feel guilty if their church is in decline. There are all sorts of possible reasons for that. But we can and must reverse the overall decline in churchgoing and in Christian faith. I am not trying to put pressure on clergy by saying that: simply to open us all up to the real possibility that God can use us to grow his church.

Second, it is very necessary in our present climate to encourage Christians and to boost their confidence in the gospel, in the basic core truths of the Christian message. The gospel is God's good news for all people and we as Christians are called to share the gospel, to spread the gospel and to grow the kingdom. Confidence in the gospel is partly to do with what I mentioned earlier: joy. I am amazed that Jesus loves me. I am thrilled that he called me into Christian ministry. The joy he gives is so real and I want to share it with other ministers and Christian people. I intend to help people be more confident in the gospel by teaching clearly myself, by setting an example, by witnessing to Christ's saving love and his gracious call, by sharing his joy in ministry.

Third, a pressing need for the church in our generation is for Christians to be more united. I don't just mean Christians from different denominations or from different churches. I agree with that. But I have in mind particularly Christians within the Anglican Church. We have seen in recent years a moving apart of Anglicans for all sorts of different reasons. People are identifying all too often with their own group or tribe or theology within Anglicanism. Of course no church is perfect, but the Church of England which I love and which I want to be strong and alive, simply has too many divisions within it. I am determined during my time here as Bishop to do all I can to unite Anglican Christians so that our witness is clear and strong and our Lord is glorified. I am delighted that we have a link with an African diocese, Bungoma, and I look forward to developing a deep Christian friendship with Bishop George and his people. I'm sorry he can't be here today. *[The bishop's plane in Kenya was grounded because of the Icelandic ash cloud.]*

In seeking to unite Anglican Christians I am not in any way working against the unity of the wider Christian church, or against the different sort of unity and harmony of all people in society, but our own church does need to be united. So I am going to seek to bring together the different strands of catholic Anglicans, the different strands of liberal Anglicans, the different strands of evangelical Anglicans and charismatic Anglicans and those of any other labels or none. I want to bring them together and help them to know that we are one Church, together following the same Lord Jesus, together hearing his word, together knowing his joy, together witnessing to him, together growing stronger, for his sake and his glory.

I rejoice in this call of God to me, not in the status of being Bishop of this great Diocese, but in God's call to me to shepherd his flock. And I ask myself again, and I ask you, the Lord's threefold question to Peter.

'Do you love me?' Then I see the unspoken but gloriously obvious punch line: 'Because I love you enough to entrust my people, to you. Feed my lambs.'

'Do you love me? Because despite your weaknesses and potential for putting your foot in it I love you enough to ask you to care for my people. Tend my sheep.'

'Do you love me? Because despite your failures, your denials and even betrayal of me I love you enough to put into your hands the well being of my church which I bought with my own blood. Feed my sheep.'

One of my favourite hymns still is: *Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so*. Let's not be embarrassed to keep it that simple. In his love is our joy and our strength – and in his love is our resource to love him and serve him and serve his people and his world.

Alleluia, Christ is risen. **He is risen indeed. Alleluia.**