Gracious Lord, in the midst of all that brings us here, in the midst of our concerns, our joys, in the midst of all that would distract us as we gather in the name of your Son, and in the midst of our thanksgiving for those who are being presented for ordination, for each one, for the gifts and graces that you've already manifested in each one of them that brings us here to this place, Lord, we commit all of this into your hands. We confess to you, Lord, we need you. We need you deeply. And so we ask that as we gather today, be glorified. And we say, speak to us, Lord, in word, sacrament, song and prayer, for your servants are listening. For it is in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord that we pray. AMEN.

While we were singing the opening hymn, St. Patrick's Breastplate, as the lyrics are called, I was brought back easily 25 years, to when my grown children were small. My wife and I have five sons. And we would pray together as a family every morning before they were to go off to school. And we would have a little ritual that we would do. We would sing a worship chorus and then each one of us would pray. Now, they could pray anything they wanted to, from “Lord, help me with my math test today” to “dear Lord, I'm kind of feeling sick” as in I hope my parents let me stay home, or other things that might come up. They're just kids. And we would do that and then say “Amen”. And, what reminded me of the St. Patrick's hymn, is that we would all recite, “put on”, out of the sixth chapter of Ephesians, the whole armor of God. We would stand up, and we'd say “helmet of salvation, sword of the Spirit, breastplate of righteousness, shield of faith, belt of truth, feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace”. Then they'd be off to school. Can I confess something to you? I still do that. And I bring it up because that, in a very simple form, is precisely what we are singing in, “Christ beneath me, Christ beside me, Christ be with me,” and all of the deep, profound spiritual warfare language that is contained in the exaltation of Jesus in the opening hymn.

I think it's more than appropriate that we sing it, because, deacons, you're going to need it. And I'm not being facetious. You see, you are called on behalf of the church and in the name of Jesus, to engage in what can only be described as frontline ministry. In contrast to priests, whose anchors are pulpit and altar - both pieces of furniture inside a church building - the ordination service for deacons mentions neither of these things. Instead, the ordination service for deacons provides a job description that is almost entirely a ministry outside the four walls of a church building. It doesn't give you furniture at all. In fact, furniture would be antithetical to a ministry on the street, in the office, at the local coffee shop, in a hospital, working among the neediest of our culture and society. You need different equipment.

What you need is a helmet of salvation, sword of the Spirit, breastplate of righteousness, to be able to live and be at home, and this is important, to be at home outside the margins of insider church life. It's okay that we have an insider church life. I'm not decrying it. It's inevitable, in fact. We use a lingo that nobody else uses. We have language that is entirely different from most of the conversation. Just listen to a normal television show. Does anybody ever say ambo, purificator, verse? You could kind of go on and on and on. It's a language that is really quite foreign. And we know it. We are, in fact, comfortable with it. It names things that are deeply important to us, so I am not at all trying to somehow hint that we need to get rid of that language.

But what we actually need are translators, men and women who actually know the culture of Netflix, CNN, what's happening in their community, the word, as it were, on the street, and have the capacity to be able to speak the word of Jesus into that culture, using language where they're at home. They can and should be invited in, because we enjoy, by the grace and mercy of God, a mystery that is greater than all of our language.
Before which we are, in fact, often mute. But they'll never get there if all we know is sort of the insider Episcopalian stuff, or Baptist, Methodist, Assemblies of God.

It's not peculiar to our tradition. Which is why the church, in her wisdom and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has raised up an order of people who have a very specific outsider kind of responsibility. Do you have anything? If priests put up an altar, do you have anything? Yes, (you have) one thing, God willing: It's the Bible. There's a reason that as a part of your declaration at the beginning, you say in a very clear way that you believe the Bible to be the word of God and to contain all things necessary for salvation. Because what that means is that you have a corpus of material that you are free to use, free to use and express it in ways that are in fact quite contemporary with culture, so long as your new language doesn't contradict with that which is written. Because you can't present one face to the world, and then invite them in and draw back the curtain and say, "Now there's a lot that I haven't told you yet," in a way that contradicts what you've already spoken.

The wonder of the ministry of Jesus is that he had the extraordinary capacity to develop a system of language that was entirely consistent with what it was that God was speaking to him. And yet through mechanisms, devices like parables and stories, he was able to culturally speak in a way that the people who heard him understood the language that he was saying, even though they didn't always understand the meaning of what he was conveying. There was an intentional connection that was meant to be an invitation. The invitation is, "I'm coming to you, come to me. Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden." They would never have heard that unless he was standing up there with the Pharisees and the Sadducees. He had to get out. And oh, brothers and sister, that's your calling - to get out. Because you're charged according to the ordination service, to make Christ known among those with whom you live.

I don't know about the church you attend, but most of the churches in this diocese, what they have in common is their membership in the Episcopal church. It's not that they live in a particular neighborhood, or all work for the same company. To say that your job is to make Christ known among those among whom you live, automatically assumes you're talking about a different group of people than those whom you see on a Sunday morning, among those whom you live and work. The ordination service says that you're not an insider getting paid by the church to do church things. You've got a job out there, or you are in retirement where you have a source of income quite different from the operating budget of the congregation, because that's where your ministry is.

And then finally it says, among whom you worship. But notice that's third. You're not excluded from, but look at it this way. If you're a priest, what you do actually flows out of what happens right up here. It is, and should be, an altar-based ministry, so that wherever you go you are sharing the sacraments of Christ, you're speaking the word, you're living in a tradition, and it informs and shapes who you are.

As a deacon, it's a different kind of ball game, because your job is to interpret to the church, as the service says, the needs, concerns and hopes of the world. Because the assumption of the service is we insiders don't always know what that is. And it takes an extraordinary level of humility on the part of priests and bishops, to understand that my insider life really does set me at a kind of distance from the regular life of the world, that is both a place of protection, but it is also a place of ignorance. And I need deacons to speak to me about the things that are happening out there about which I know very, very little, especially if the culture with which they are connected is very different from my own culture. We need these kinds of culture interpreters. Otherwise, we're very dangerously accused of being irrelevant in a way that actually makes evangelism impossible.
And then, after all of that it says, assist bishops and priests in public worship. Do you see where the accent is? It's not on altar ministry, if you're talking about being a deacon. There's a reason that our tradition is that the gospel gets processed all the way out into the center of the congregation. It's a symbol of saying, where is the gospel being proclaimed on the part of the deacons? It's in the world. It's among you regular, normal people, because that is their job. That's their responsibility.

But I want to say that to do that, and to do that well, asks of you a lot. If I were to hone in on a verse that says, for me, everything, it is 2 Corinthians 4:5. "For we do not proclaim ourselves. We proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord," meaning over all the world, by the way, not just of my local church, "and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake." And that gets laid out in very specific terms just after the verses that were read this morning in the epistle where he says, "What does servanthood look like?" He says, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not driven to despair. Persecuted, but not forsaken. Struck down, but not destroyed. Always carrying, in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our bodies." (2 Corinthians 4:8-10)

In other words, to go out there, to live among people who do not know Christ, to make that the locus of your ministry, to learn the language of the street, to find a way to share the gospel with people for whom going to church is a problem, costs in a big way. It is an invitation at some level to a certain kind of suffering. Whether that be the intercessory burdens of people who do not know how to say yes, or maybe are not even interested in saying yes to Jesus, or the agonies that you are coming to discover of people who have been deeply wounded by the church, or by the culture, in a way that makes them go, "Go to church? You've got to be kidding me." You know people like that, don't you? Of course you do.

So who's going to reach them? Well guess what, deacons. You’re charged with having that kind of specificity in terms of your order of ministry. It is what you see, hear and know through the discernment of Christ, that informs how you live in the world. You are not called to live as a church Christian in the world. You are called to live as a world Christian when you are inside the church. You are not a church insider. You are a world insider who probably feels, more than any other order of ministry, a sense of really not fitting in, either in the world or perhaps even in the church. Because to be in those venues, to listen to those voices, cannot help but shape you, and they should. Your heart goes out to those who do not know Christ. And in some ways your gift to the church is the fact that you pay attention to the world.

Now that's important. For me, this is at the nub of what I want to try to communicate. We face a kind of double bind. We are called to pay attention both to the God that we cannot see, and communicate with him. Find ways to hear his voice, some of which does, among some at least, speak audibly. But often more than that, it's the tuning of the heart to the impressions, the capacity, the notice, that becomes for you the way God speaks to you, and to pay attention to a neighbor whose pain can often be closer than we would prefer. Alan Jacobs, in his book, in “The Year of Our Lord 1943”, puts it this way. "In the face of human suffering, everything within us wants to turn away”. It is the temptation, that temptation, which in fact must be resisted. In other words, it’s a temptation to do that. It is particularly hard when the sufferer has no words to describe their trauma.

Jacobs puts it this way. "They cannot communicate through language what it is like to be them, for they," and he quotes W. H. Auden, "As for those, they are like those who've been struck by so many blows that it leaves them struggling on the ground like a half crushed worm. They have no words to express what is even
happening to them." And if there is anything that is marking our era, is more and more and more we are discovering men and women who behind the “how are you, I'm fine”, live with a certain level of trauma that becomes for them a kind of emotional place of self-protection from further wounding, and as a result keeps them at some distance from God, and knowing the tenderness of his love.

So to pay attention to these sufferers is a costly obligation. It means foregoing the privilege of looking away and foregoing the privilege of offering easy words. It places us in a kind of Jacobs’ rights of spiritual poverty, where we have nothing to offer except our own uneasy companionship, praying somehow that through us Christ would display his healing love. We do not proclaim ourselves but Christ Jesus. And who are we? We are your slaves for his sake.

Because we have so much information coming at us, we have profoundly trained ourselves to walk with something similar to horse blinders, because there's only so much we can take in, and it gets worse rather than better. And because we have selected and trained ourselves to have both a kind of selective hearing, as well as a kind of selective seeing, and when we say to the Lord, "Jesus, please use me as your servant," a part of what he is out to do, if the Bible is true, is to basically take the blinders off and to give us a new set of eyes to see as he sees, because he does not turn away, thank God, from any human suffering. If he did, we'd be lost.

And if God gives us the grace to begin to see as he sees, even if it breaks our hearts, even if we come into a new place of spiritual poverty because we cannot control our own lives anymore, too many people have claims upon it and we're trying to find a way to live as a servant, that in fact becomes the beginning of wisdom. The kind of child-like helplessness without which we cannot see the Kingdom of God.

Brothers and sisters, if you want to be great, this is how it looks in the eyes of Jesus. I don't want to be great. I just want to get by. Well, you can; but if you're saying yes to these commitments, something more is being asked of you than just getting by. So you've said yes.

And God, we need you. We need you, because we cannot see. We as a church are too self-protected. We as a church want the comfort of being insiders. We are still in love with haberdashery and a certain kind of order that is meant to convey the beauty of God, not meant to convey, “oh, that's who the important person is”. But we can use it that way. And so you need to speak to us and call us to the servanthood of Jesus that we so desperately need for our souls' sake, as well as for the sake of the world. Otherwise our language of evangelism or even pastoral care becomes inadequate at best, and we will do our best to go for the easy answer because it will make us feel good, because we've done our job. God have mercy.

So you're going to get in trouble. We're not going to always like it. You're going to say things we may not want to hear. Say them anyway. Say them anyway. Be willing to speak the truth in love, asking God to shield you from self-righteousness and the need to be right, and instead to have the grace to serve as slaves for Jesus' sake. Because by doing so, you call all of us to servanthood. You call all of us to be uncomfortable with our own clichés, and you call us again to see a God who so loved the world, not just Christians, AMEN.