



## Sermon 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year

At this time we give thanks for the witness of St Peter, the rock on which the Church is founded and the head of the apostles; and the witness of St Paul, tireless preacher of the Gospel to the gentiles and the intellectual driving force of the early Church; but they were both human beings with frailties and weaknesses.

So it is easy to see why this Feast should be one of the days traditionally associated with ordinations; and up and down the land, Cathedrals and Parish Churches are filled with proud families and friends gathered round those to be ordained deacon and priest. If you remember, last year, we were privileged to be part of the ordination of Fr James to the Priesthood.

And it is a privilege to be a priest. For we are all unworthy; we are all sinful men; we all have weaknesses. So, I thank God for St Paul, who writes in his second letter to the Corinthians of his prayer to the Lord that he might be freed from the painful affliction that tormented him: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' The life of a priest is characterised by many things: he is privileged to be present to people in their joys and sorrows, their triumphs and tragedies. He goes to the altar to offer Mass and to make present the Body and Blood of Christ; he goes with the needs of the people on his heart; and he often takes his own burdens with him; whether that is the expectations of others that cannot be fulfilled; his own feelings of luke warmness, or tiredness; or the prayers of others that have been asked.

The vestments we wear symbolise the life to which we have been called. A particular prayer is said when putting on each garment. When we put on the alb, we pray that we may be purified in the blood of the Lamb; the girdle symbolises the life of chastity; the stole, the strip of material that hangs over the shoulders, reminds us of our unworthiness to draw near to this mystery, but also prays for the eternal joy to which we are called; finally, the chasuble is put on with a prayer for the strength to carry the burden that Christ lays upon us.

You may not know this, but before each Mass, the priest, in his final prayers before Mass begins, reminds himself of the intention for that day. Sometimes it is for someone who has died; sometimes for someone who is sick; sometimes it might be for a particular need, or in thanksgiving for some glad event. On a Sunday, the intention is always for the whole Church, for all of us gathered here. At the Offertory, when the bread and wine are brought forward to be placed on the Altar, the priest mentally 'renews' that intention; he reminds himself of the particular need or prayer that he formed before the Mass began, and mentally places it, along with the bread and wine, on the altar, laying it at the feet of the Lord.

Every Mass, then, is a rich tapestry, in which are woven joy, sorrow, penitence, purity, weakness, grace, strength, unworthiness, humanity, mystery and thanksgiving. The bread and wine become the Body and Blood of the Lord; and bit by slow bit, the earthly clay of our humanity is transfigured by the fire and light of the Holy Spirit.

As I say, the priest is a human being; very often, he is only too aware of his faults and failings even as he gives thanks for the life to which he is called. The expectations on him are sometimes great, and occasionally burdensome.

And it is in the light of that that I want to say something to you now.

I am aware that there has been a bit of what the Bible calls murmuring among some people expressing discontent, whether it's about the liveliness of the hymns, the frequency of trips and so forth. Murmuring, or gossip, or backbiting, is not a good thing for many reasons. First, it is corrosive; it gets back and it demoralises. At its worst it causes depression and drains people of energy and drive. St James's epistle has a stern warning for us: he describes the tongue as a fire and then goes on to say: 'With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.'

Like all clergy, I have my faults and weaknesses. We are human beings and capable of mistakes. But I can put my hand on my heart and say, first that I try to love the Lord (though very badly at times), second that I try to make him known and loved. But I must be honest with you: I am feeling very tired, not physically, but mentally, and I have felt a little ground down

The Bishop reminded me this week that the task of being Vicar of St Paul's is not an easy one for a number of reasons and that it has taken its toll on priests; but that he had wanted me to do it differently from my predecessors. First, although I am very lucky to have a priest colleague (one of the few Churches in the area still to have them) the situation was very different some years ago. Then, if you remember, you had Fr Andrew, myself, Fr Tony, Fr Robin and a pastoral assistant. Yes, we had St John's then, but, at the moment we also have St Benet's, to all intents and purposes. So things have to be different. In the parish profile you asked for a spiritual leader, by which I understand you meant that you wanted someone who would be freed up to concentrate on the life of prayer and the celebration of the sacraments, leaving some of the more practical things to other people, such as organising trips, taking some initiatives and seeing those initiatives through.

SO, about things like hymns. I have heard it said that the hymns are not always lively. All I can say is, that I thought I was choosing exactly the same hymns as had always been chosen. Perhaps, we need to learn some more new ones. That is a point I take and I will reflect on that.

But I would prefer it if criticism were made in a constructive spirit. We are none of us perfect and we all make mistakes and I hope that you will encourage people to act in ways that build up, rather than tear down.