

‘See, I set before you today a blessing and a curse.’

These words, from the book of Deuteronomy and part of the first reading, continue the theme that has, in one way or another, been playing gently in the background of our readings for a number of weeks now. The theme in question is choice. So far the choice has been between fire and water, life or death, this master or that master. Today it is between blessing and curse and, in the gospel, rock or sand.

Put like this, it would seem obvious what we would choose but, as we have noted, in practice, it is not always as simple as that. Many things distract us from making the right choice. The clarity of our vision is distorted by sin, selfishness, greed. No wonder the gospel writers set so much store by stories of Jesus healing those born blind. Seeing is a precious faculty but it is also a powerful metaphor for moral vision, that ability to make choices based on our life in Christ, that life of grace to which, by Baptism, we are all invited.

In Baptism, that moral vision, the capacity to see clearly the path we should tread, the road we should take, the narrow gate through which we are to pass, is restored to us.

In a moment we will baptise three children, who will then be children of God. They will be our brothers and sisters. For them and for us, Baptism is the foundation stone. It is not the whole foundation and I don't think that any house would last long if it were only built on a foundation stone. More is needed.

It will need the nurture of the parents and Godparents. They will add to the foundation by their example and that is a major responsibility. Children learn from their parents so they will need to see that you

are people of prayer, that you have a life built on solid foundations, that Christ is your rock and your stronghold, the one to whom you cling whatever the weather of your lives, in sunshine and showers, in light winds or gales.

We need the foundation of scripture. 'In times like these you need a Bible,' says the hymn so familiar to us and which we sing with such gusto. How true: it is the Word of the Lord. In it we hear the words of Jesus speaking to us from the pages of the Gospels, challenging us, urging us, but also loving us, taking on our burdens and redeeming us from our slavery to sin.

We need the foundation of the Church and her sacramental life. Baptism provides that first building block; but we need to build on that by means of the Eucharist. Bit by bit, little by little, each time we come to Mass, we are sustained by the Body and Blood of the Lord. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, we become just a little more like the one who feeds us. Gradually, eyes and ears are opened, and the love and joy of the Lord becomes a living reality and his Spirit is able to work in our hearts and lives. The fruits of the Spirit, slowly, it is true, begin to ripen in a harvest of love, joy, patience and peace, gentleness and self-control.

This is our prayer for those who are to be baptised and it should be our continuing prayer for all of us as journey towards the Heavenly Kingdom.

As I say this, I am very conscious that today is the day on which I take my leave of St Paul's. I do so with much sadness because I love St Paul's and have so much to be grateful to St Paul's for. These last four years have been an added bonus because it was St Paul's that laid much of the foundation of my priestly life. True, I have served in other parishes but, if anyone asks me, I will always tell them that it

was largely here that I learned so much of the joys of priesthood. It is here that I have been able to learn my greatest lessons, yes, and probably to make my greatest mistakes, too. The latter are my fault, the rest is the work of God's grace. I am very aware of my faults and I hope that by God's grace I will continue to learn how to be a faithful priest. I have my failures of energy and my moments of doubt, an awareness of the things I might have handled better, but there has been mainly joy at being given the privilege of being a priest in God's Church. And that, my brothers and sisters, is mainly because of you.

But I have been reflecting on the life of the Church in the light of today's Gospel; and I have come to believe that the Church, for it to be able to withstand the storms of, say, secularism and persecution, must be built on the rock of Peter and that the ultimate vocation of the Church is to be the people of Jesus Christ, gathered in communion round the successor of Peter. This is not to say that Popes have always been Saints, or that the Catholic Church has always avoided corruption or sin. But my reflections on the nature of the Church, above all the rock, Peter, upon which it is to be built, have led me to the point where I must go where my heart leads.

And so, with much love, with thanks to those who have faithfully, and patiently, put up with me in their capacity as Churchwardens over these four years, to those who have served St Paul's with such faith and commitment and devotion, I want to assure you of my prayers and continuing friendship as we all continue to build our lives on the ultimate foundation, namely our Lord himself.