

A Homily on 40 Years of Priesthood

RUBY JUBILEE HOMILY

Isaiah 61:1-3; Ps. 22; Eph 4:1-7, 11-13; John 15:9-17

1. Occasionally, people ask me whether I had always wanted to be a priest, and the short answer is yes. I am sure a number of priests will tell you that they recognise the beginning of their vocation in the family they were born in to and grew up in: the love their parents gave them, the sacrifices their parents made, and the values they held dear. This is certainly true for my brother Tony and me. I also remember the occasions when the priests would visit us at home. I was fascinated by them. They always seemed so cheerful, able to talk about anything, and they were interested in us. It was a great thrill when, after I had made my First Holy Communion, the Parish Priest invited me to serve at the altar, and I found myself closely involved in another aspect of the life of the priest.
2. I was influenced, too, simply by the faithfulness of the other people we saw regularly at church, always there, week after week. For them, as for us, this matter of going to church was clearly very important and valuable. Later on, in my teenage years, the idea of being a priest took a clearer form, and occasionally a teacher at school or a parishioner would ask me quietly whether I had ever thought of being a priest. I never found that question or suggestion intrusive. On the contrary, it was so affirming, because it helped me to see that this notion that I had was not so crazy after all. I was in my second year at university when I finally decided to apply to the Bishop of Clifton. The

Catholic Chaplain at Oxford University at that time was a certain Fr Crispian Hollis. I received great encouragement from him and also from other young men and women, fellow-students, who were exploring their own vocation to priesthood or religious life. One day, Fr Crispian said to me, “You never know, you might be my curate one day.” And, as things turned out, that is exactly what happened. I am so pleased that Bishop Crispian is here today. As is Fr Tim Galligan, who is a fellow-student from those days.

3. That **First Reading from the prophet Isaiah** speaks of vocation, of a sense of being called and commissioned. The special task being given is to be a bearer of good news, to comfort, to console, to support. I think it reflects the strong desire I had to spend my life in trying to do good, in wanting to help in some way to ease the burdens of others. It reflects optimism, idealism and enthusiasm; an outlook which I hope has not been unduly dented by the passing of the years. It’s a passage which Jesus quotes when he returns to his home town of Nazareth and preaches in the synagogue. It is a kind of manifesto for the public ministry he is about to undertake. And so it stands for all those positive influences I received in the parishes and schools where I grew up.

4. In his **Letter to the Ephesians**, Paul speaks of the variety of kinds of service which help to build up the body of Christ. The list includes the roles of pastor and teacher. If I had not become the one, I would probably have become the other. The passage reminds me that in our service of the church, in the service of God’s people, we are all involved in something which is far bigger than

ourselves, but in which our contribution has its own unique value. As St Paul puts it: so that the saints together make a unity in the work of service, building up the body of Christ. Here I would like to pay tribute to my fellow priests, good friends who support each other with kindness, encouragement, generosity and good humour, and with their example of faithfulness in prayer and pastoral work. I was so lucky that Bishop Mervyn sent me first to Clifton Cathedral. There I was one of four priests, including Alan Finley who is also here this evening. There the work was plentiful and very varied, and we could gain experience very quickly. But what I valued, more than anything, was that the presbytery was always full of laughter, and that made all the difference.

5. The reading from **St John's Gospel** comes from Jesus' discourse at the Last Supper. He speaks of the relationship of deepest love between his father and himself. He says that his disciples, and that includes ourselves, are called to be a part of that love. We are to remain in his love; and we will do so if we keep his commandments, if we try to we love one another as he has loved us. He calls us into friendship, into the closest possible intimacy with him. And for me this means, among other things, the life of prayer. It is prayer which underpins the Christian life, in whatever form it is lived out, including the pastoral ministry. Without him, we can do nothing. So here I would like to pay tribute to all who have taught me about prayer, who have been people of prayer, people who are close to God and who pray for us constantly.
6. I would like to mention one more aspect of priestly life at which I marvel, and that is the trust and confidence which our people place in us. They allow us to

touch their lives at times when it is most important to them, in times of great joy and happiness, and at times of the greatest sorrow and distress. And when they confide to us the things they value most, the things they feel most deeply, they do us the greatest honour. So here I want to say thank you to all the people of the parishes I have been associated with, for their love, their friendship and their trust, and for the support of their prayers.

7. A friend of mine was telling me recently of the occasion when he and his wife were celebrating their Silver Wedding. The priest who had married them twenty-five years previously was invited back to celebrate the anniversary Mass. He began his homily with the words: well, Mary and John, after twenty-five years of happy, married life, all I can say to you is: so far...so good. I can imagine the same priest saying to me today: well, Jeremy, after all these years of happy and fulfilled life in the priesthood, all I can say to you is: so far...so good.

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