**Homily – Celebration of Priesthood**

It is St Ambrose who gives us a beautiful way into this Gospel reading, when in one of his commentaries he notes:

“Go into your room,” the Saviour says, but by ‘room’ you must understand, not a room enclosed by walls that imprison your body, but the room that is within you, the room where you hide your thoughts, where you keep your affections. This room of prayer is always with you, wherever you are, and it is always a secret room, where only God can see you.”

I suppose we might call that the seat of the personality, the sacred place where we our most ourselves, the inner heart. Priestly life is in many ways a journey to this inner room, and to be lived from this inner space. It is of course the work of a lifetime. It means that our lives are lived with a two-fold focus – to the people and to the Lord. We take the people into our inner heart, and intercede to the Lord for them, we move from our encounters with the Lord in the inner heart to the people, in service and ministry.

We describe this in respect of our ordination by theologically saying that we are configured to Christ, the High Priest and Shepherd. As Shepherds we are called to what *Pastores Dabo Vobis* describes as ‘a pastoral charity’, to remember that we are servants. Many times we recognise that we are indeed “to bring good news to the poor, to help the oppressed go free, to bind up hearts that are broken and to proclaim liberty to captives”.

So much of this is indeed a hidden almsgiving, a secret work, carried out in ways known only to God and to those whom we accompany and minister to. So often, too, this is carried out without a huge sense of accomplishment or achievement, and, at times, we recognise that ‘our left hand’ does not know ‘what the right is doing’.

Yet, it is a huge grace to be invited to identify ourselves with the Lord in His outreach to His people, to preach the Word to them and to administer the Sacraments. Often in this pastoral charity we realise – perhaps rightly - that they are much holier than we are.

Recently, in reflecting on this pastoral outreach, Pope Francis indicated that we must never forget that we are Shepherds who are particularly concerned with the lost. Holding before us the parable of the lost sheep he challenges us by turning it on its head – so often he says we are concerned with the one who has remained behind whilst the 99 have gone missing! Of course there is an ache in this for all of us. But we must also make it our pastoral, administrative and organisational priority. We need to be freed as pastors to have the energy, the focus, the resources, the support, to reach out to the 99. We need to free ourselves from the burden of only looking to the one who has remained safe in the fold, and reach out in practical ways to the 99 and help them find their way home.

This is only possible if we ourselves are engaged in an ongoing process of conversion. Here we see the other dimension of the heart and of our priesthood – to be configured to Christ the High Priest. At our centre is not my own isolated personality but the ongoing dialogue which is the very heart of God who is Trinity, and who has made me in His own image and likeness. It is on the altar of our hearts that we each make our own sacrifice and offering to the Lord. For us, as priests, this is framed in our living out of the Evangelical counsels – obedience, celibacy and a simplicity of life. We might call these the ‘fasting’ of our life – each in its own way and in the myriad ways in which they are manifest in our lives can be a vehicle which is to assist us to come into the reality of our own hearts. Yes, we experience this as a place of poverty but we do so only because we each know our dependence on God.

I hope we can live these commitments with a deep joy and confidence knowing the very deep personal love and friendship that Jesus, our first and truest love, is offering us. Please let us live them without the gloomy look of the Pharisee, without being what Pope Francis termed ‘sourpusses’ in his Apostolic Exhortation. Isn’t that just wonderful to find in a Papal document?

Clearly we each journey to discover the renewal of our hearts, that we may be truly configured to Christ, High Priest and Shepherd. You will be aware that June is the month of the Sacred Heart, in which we recall that particularly in the heart of Jesus we discover the full extent of our vocation to love God and His people with the love with which He has within us.

He is the One with the heart Wounded for our sake and poured out in love for each of us, to bring us to the Father. The priest is the one who is to mirror His Lord, in imitation of Him, to have wounded heart, too.

 Karl Rahner, that famous 20th century theologian, put it like this,

“The priest of the future will need to be……the man with the pierced heart, from which alone he draws strength for his mission. With the heart pierced through by the godlessness of life, pierced through by the folly of love, pierced through by lack of success, pierced through by the experience of his own wretchedness and profound unreliability, believing that only such a heart communicates the strength for his mission….he is the man with the pierced heart because he is to lead others to the very core of their existence, to their inmost heart…because he and others can only find this centre of existence, if they accept its being pierced by the incomprehensibility of love that is pleased to conquer only in death.”

The rest we must leave to God working in us, and in the Church, through the Holy Spirit: “Glory be to Him whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory be to Him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus, for ever and ever”.

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