

Homily 28 October 2012

The Gospel reading today began: "As Jesus left Jericho ..." 53 years ago in Rome, I received the tonsure from the Bishop of Jericho and so became a cleric. Three years later, on this very day, 28th October, again in Rome, Cardinal William Godfrey of Westminster ordained me a priest.

Thank you for coming today to share with me my joy in 50 years of sacred priesthood. I welcome especially members of my family who have come from Bury and other parts of Lancashire; from Cheshire; from Yorkshire; from Tyne & Wear; from Scotland; from Ireland; and even from Carolina USA. I welcome friends from so many different places: from parishes where I have served, Sacred Heart Gorton and St Dunstan Moston. As well as others who have served with me in various capacities at diocesan level.

The sharp ones among you may have noticed that the 28th October, the day I was ordained a priest, is the feast day of Sts Simon and Jude. St Jude is the patron of hopeless cases! But in 1962, 28th October was a Sunday. It was the solemnity of Christ the King. The apostles Simon and Jude were not commemorated that year. But I still rely heavily on St Jude, patron of hopeless cases.

"Who do you think you are?" is a popular TV show. It traces a person's family tree back through the generations. Transfer that to the spiritual line. When a Catholic priest is ordained he knows for sure that his priesthood goes all the way back to one of the apostles. As we say in the Creed: "I believe in one, catholic, and apostolic church."

Cardinal Godfrey, who ordained me, was himself made a bishop by Cardinal Rossi. Cardinal Rossi was in turn ordained a bishop by Cardinal Gaetano de Lai. And he was ordained a bishop by no less a person than Pope St Pius X. There are at least four popes in my priestly line. That line can be traced back to the year 1541 and then the records are lost, through earthquake or fire or flood or simply negligent bookkeeping. If the records were there, every validly ordained priest could trace his line back to one of the 12 apostles and Christ.

Going back in that line I share the same lineage as Blessed John Henry Newman. Blessed John Henry Newman prepared for his ordination in 1847 by making a retreat at the very ancient church of Sts John and Paul in Rome. So too did Pope John XXIII in 1904. I also prepared for ordination by making a retreat there. Look what happened to Blessed John Henry and Blessed Pope John! And here am I in Prestwich!

Being in retreat 50 years ago meant that you were cut off from the world. And the world was on the edge of nuclear war. It was the Cuban missiles crisis that very week. And those of us who were in retreat knew nothing about it. We only discovered later how the world held its breath, and Khrushchev gave way.

Nor did we pay any attention to the music scene in England. Little known groups called the Rolling Stones and the Beatles had just formed that very summer. Our attention was taken up with what was happening in Rome. The 2nd Vatican Council had just opened on the 11th of October. Those of us ordained 17 days later were the first fruits of the Council!

“Who do you think you are?” - a question that could well be addressed to us priests looking at our spiritual line. The second reading at Mass today answers that question. Every priest “is taken from among men and is appointed to act for men [and for women] in their relations with God.” “Taken from among men.” A priest doesn’t drop down from the skies. He’s not a stranger from another planet. He is a member of an ordinary family. He understands family life. He’s made like anyone else, with much the same virtues and vices, the same desires and struggles and fears. He’s made from the same stuff as anyone else.

Precisely because of that, as the Letter to the Hebrews explains, “he can sympathise with those who are ignorant or uncertain because he too lives in the limitations of weakness.”

The priest can’t be anything other than human. When a priest announces the Word of God, when he forgives sins in the sacrament of penance, he never feels above the rest. He feels a sense of solidarity with people because he knows that he himself is

in need of pardon; knows that he too will be judged by the Word he proclaims. A priest therefore will usually speak of us rather than you. He knows he is one of the flock before he is a shepherd.

But to be ordained is to begin a new life. It's a life marked by service. A priest's life is no longer just his. It's a life of service to others. You can say the same of course about a doctor, at the service of his patients. Or the same about a married person, consecrated to the service of spouse and children, and life which must continue. So where's the difference in the service of a priest?

The difference lies in what he does. He is taken from among men, but "appointed to act for men in their relations with God." Taken from among men and given back to them. Given back so that he may act for men and women in their relations with God. What a priest does goes right to the heart of our lives as human beings. Goes to that deepest part of us where we touch the mystery and the life of God.

The priest is privileged to share the ministerial priesthood of Christ: Christ who is the one mediator between God and man. So the priest is given back to the people to be at their service in the Word of God, and to make them one with God at the altar. When a priest offers holy Mass, he opens for them the Word of God and he represents for his people the atoning sacrifice of Christ.

St Paul put it in a nutshell when he wrote that priests should think of themselves as "servants of Christ" and "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1Cor 4:1). A priest must therefore be "another Christ" to his people. It's a wonderful privilege. I really encourage any young person sitting here this morning / evening to take seriously a call to the priesthood since there will probably be at least one of you here that is being called.

Lacordaire was a famous French priest and preacher. You may have come across something Lacordaire once wrote:

- A priest has to be a member of every family without belonging to any one of them.
- He must share their sufferings, be party to their secrets, and heal their wounds.
- Every day he must go from his people to God, to offer their devotion and prayer. And every day he must return from God to his people, to bring them God's

pardon and hope.

To go back to St Paul. Paul has a lovely sentence in one of his letters where again he describes a priest: "We are not dictators over your faith. We are fellow workers with you, helpers of your joy" (2Cor 1:24). Bishop Holland (of beloved memory) chose that phrase as his motto: "Adiutor gaudii vestri – A helper of your joy."

Taken from among men and appointed to act for them. We're all in this together, priests and people! We priests must work for the joy of our people, and in fact it's our people who should then be our joy. Thank God the relationship between priests and people is marked with respect and affection. 30 years ago Blessed Pope John II came to this parish and said Mass in Heaton Park. Amongst the things he said was this: "The partnership between priests and people is built upon prayer, collaboration and mutual respect and love. That has always been the tradition of these islands. May it never be lost."

The priest is always conscious of the fact that he carries the great treasure of priesthood in a vessel of clay. He depends so much on the prayerful support of the people he serves. I want to thank you all for the support you give me. And I invite you in this Mass to pray for all those who celebrate their anniversary of ordination at this time.