

JUBILEES 2020

Homily at the Diocesan Jubilarians celebration, 8/10/20

The celebration of jubilees of ordination has different moments: these include a time when we say all sorts of nice things about each other (and you've no idea how we get carried away and exaggerate when doing that!). But in the context of our Mass, it might be the time to reflect on what it is we have been called to, and have given our lives for.

That, according to the Second Vatican Council, is first and foremost a "ministry of the word"; that word which, (as we heard in the first reading from Deuteronomy) is not out of our reach; and which, (as we heard in the Gospel of St John), makes its home within us, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Today, the challenge facing all of us is how to proclaim that word effectively. When Jesus spoke of God's reign (kingdom), it was credible because He was – yet some didn't even believe him. So, in our day, how are we to speak convincingly about something that can seem so other-worldly? How to speak about the nearness of what can seem remote? How to speak with a sense of urgency about what seems out of sight and postponable?

Well, it seems God had this problem a long time ago, and told the prophet Ezekiel to "be a sign" - to act out the message he was speaking. In that little piece of drama, the prophet was to put his whole body where his mouth was. That's what the Church asks of its priests. We are to put our whole life and whole self where our mouths are. It is meant to be dramatic, to be a sign.

This is asking a lot; but it was always so. Moses said God was asking too much. God told him: "I shall be with you". Isaiah said "don't send me, I am not holy enough". God said "I will make you holy". Jeremiah said "they'll slaughter me, I have a terrible stutter!". God said, "go anyway". Paul said "I am not worthy to be called an apostle". Jesus said "that's right". And Peter, in the hour of Jesus' greatest need, denied even knowing him. And Jesus said to Peter: "feed my lambs, feed my sheep."

The point is this: to each one of us Jesus has said, as to Paul: "my power will be more manifest in your weakness". That is precisely what makes the reign of God come very close; not so other-worldly after all; not remote, not out of sight, not postponable.

Jubilees are not just about numbers of years, but about years of service, self-sacrifice and faithfulness. During my time as bishop of the diocese, after coming away from visiting priests especially in country parishes, I often felt truly humbled and admiring of these men for being at their posts, day in day out, week in week out, year in year out. That kind of faithfulness is truly a prophetic sign in our day: it is counter-cultural in a society that easily excuses unfaithfulness, and even doubts whether faithfulness is possible.

All those who witness to faithfulness, whether in marriage, in homes, work-places, neighbourhoods, or Religious life, are called to be Ezekiels. It is our lives that speak the word. As Pope Francis has said: the Church evangelizes through attraction.

In celebrating jubilees of ordination, we are also celebrating the faith and faithfulness of the people we serve. Every priest knows, or pretty quickly learns, that what often incentivizes him, empowers him, enables his perseverance, urges him on, keeps him going, is the faith and faithfulness, love, sacrifices, hopes, struggles, sorrows and courage of the people. And today, we all thank you for that.

Finally, our faithfulness (whatever our vocation) is “only a shadow” of God’s faithfulness towards us. Our perseverance is generated by God’s perseverance with us; our faithfulness is at its best when coming out of our gratitude for God’s faithfulness towards us.

God’s faithfulness was made very close to us in the person and life of Jesus. In him we see the kind of loving we are called to reciprocate. Do you ever wonder how Jesus felt whenever he awoke in the small hours? He knew the scriptures and knew the price he would pay for being faithful would be costly. He knew from daily experience what it was like to feel hurt, insulted, disbelieved. How the prospect of the coming day must sometimes have weighed heavily on him, turned his stomach, ruined his sleep...

But he also knew the Father’s love and knew that in that love he could trust absolutely. In that way he had the anchor which makes every sacrifice possible, and worthwhile. That is the anchor every one of us needs. He knew, too, that what prevents our fears from crippling us is our going out of ourselves in unstinting generosity; our being for others.

Jesus truly “went before us” (as the letter to the Hebrews would say). That’s why the calling of each of us is at its core a matter of “following”; following him who went before us. His words “follow me” define us. Allowing their selves and their lives to be defined by that call is what we celebrate in the lives of the jubilarians. That’s what we thank all of you for supporting us in; and that’s what we pray other generous young men will want to be part of.