

HOMILY FOR THE ORDINATION TO THE PERMANENT DIACONATE

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When there is a special event or anniversary in a church, we are often tempted to try to find a special piece of scripture to suit the occasion. That is a temptation I try to resist, because I think the regular pattern of scripture and prayer which we follow week by week and day by day always has something to say to us no matter what the occasion.

The readings for this ordination are taken from today's Mass, the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time. Just think again of the Old Testament reading from the minor prophet Nehemiah. It describes events, which took place about 500 years before the time of Jesus. Jerusalem had been destroyed. The Temple laid low. The People of Israel taken off into slavery in Babylon – modern day Iraq. (There is nothing new about Middle East refugee crises). But their prophets continually told them stay faithful to God. He would not abandon them He would bring them back to their land. And here in our reading the promise is fulfilled. They are back in Jerusalem. The new Temple has been built. You can see the remains of it in the so-called 'Wailing Wall' at which people still pray at today. The city walls are re-established. Now Ezra the priest tells the people they must practice their religion again properly. *"Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden dais...and opened the book. He read from the Law of God, translating and giving the sense"*. It is the final sentence which I love. Nehemiah and Ezra had to tell the people not to weep. Many of them were weeping for joy at being back in Jerusalem for the rebuilding building of the Temple

and the city. Others were weeping tears of sorrow for what had been destroyed. And so loud was the weeping that they couldn't tell the difference between those who were happy and those who were sad.

One of the privileges of the new Deacon will be to be with people at times of joy and times of sadness. Often with people who don't understand what is happening, and can't think of a way forward. The dividing line between tears of joy and tears of sadness can be a very narrow one. The deacon, and the priest and the bishop often have to deal with triumph and tragedy often on the same day.

Even in the midst of exile, the prophet Isaiah encouraged the people to hope. He dared to say *"The spirit of the Lord is upon me. He sent me to bring good news to the poor to set the downtrodden free"*. We heard Jesus reading from that prophecy in today's gospel. *"This text is being fulfilled today, even as you listen"*. The population of Nazareth didn't take that too well. The next sentence tells us:

"Who does he think he is? The carpenter's son, surely?" They hustled him out of the synagogue and were going to throw him down the cliff. (I hope the preaching of Pasquale doesn't produce the same reaction!).

Why do I give you that magical mystery tour of biblical history on this ordination day? Simply because the ministry we exercise to the glory of God and for the service of his people takes place in a particular moment in history, with particular challenges and opportunities, in circumstances which are different to just a few years ago. Cardinal Hume used to say our society has become 'opaque' to the things of God. It becomes more and more difficult to sustain the things we once took for granted. Even in this parish of Newport you have had

to make radical adjustments to a new ways of 'being Church' – not quite as bad as the destruction of the Temple and the exile but hard enough. I still hear tears of sadness and get letters of complaint about what has been lost in Newport. And there are also tears of joy for what might be coming about in the future.

The ordination of a new Deacon for this parish must surely be a cause for joy and hope. Pasquale has had a unique faith journey and already makes an extraordinary contribution to the wider community. As a deacon for the parish of All Saints he will not just be acting as an individual. He will minister in the name of the Church. That is the meaning of the 'Laying on of Hands' of the bishop, and the clothing with the vestments of a deacon. In his work of building the 'new Temple' he will listen carefully to the words of St. Paul in the reading from Corinthians:

"Just as a human body, though it is made up of many parts, is a single body...so it is with you". The different parts cannot say to each other "I do not need you". One of the tasks of the deacon is to remind people, not just in words, but in action that we all rely on each other if the Body of Christ is to be build up in this place.

The words addressed to him as he is given the scriptures will help him do precisely that:

Receive the Gospel of Christ whose herald you now are.

Believe what you read,

Teach what you believe,

And practice what you teach.

Amen
