

HOMILY FOR THE ORDINATION TO THE PRIESTHOOD

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FEAST OF ST. MARY MAGDALEN

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During the Millennium Year of 2000, the National Gallery in London mounted an exhibition called "Seeing Salvation". The subtitle was "The Image of Christ down the Ages" and traced how artists have represented Jesus in paintings, statues, wood or in metals over the last 2000 years. The exhibition exceeded all expectations of visitor numbers.

Two of my favourite pictures were hung opposite each other. One was called "Noli me Tangere" and tells the story we have just heard in the gospel. Jesus says to Mary Magdalene in the Easter Garden "Do not touch me". It was painted by Titian about the year 1515. The other picture was called "The incredulity of St. Thomas", painted in 1620 by Bernardo Strozzi. You will remember the story. When Jesus appeared to the disciples after the resurrection, Doubting Thomas wasn't with them "Unless I put my fingers into the holes that the nails have made, I refuse to believe" he said. When Jesus appeared again, he took the hand of Thomas and told him to touch him. "Put your finger into the holes that the nails have made. Put your hand into my side". In other words: 'Touch me'.

Those two pictures speak to me of the need we all have to touch, to feel, to be certain, to be sure, to be comforted, to know that what we are doing and believing makes sense. We want security in knowing the meaning and direction of our lives, no matter what our problems. The pictures remind me that we those who believe in Jesus have each been touched in some way by him, been embraced and comforted and taken by the hand when we had nowhere else to turn. 'Touch me'. But there are other times in our lives when we have to walk by faith alone. No comforts. No security. No certainty. Where is God in this, that or the other perplexing and painful circumstance of life? We are asked to live by faith. 'Do not touch me'.

The words which bring everything together, especially on this day of ordination, are addressed by Jesus to Mary Magdalene and to our new priest. "Who are you looking for?". The fact of the matter is that the whole of our lives are made up of looking and searching, hoping and expecting, wanting more to satisfy our needs, although at times we're not sure more of what. That looking beyond the horizon, the unease and dissatisfaction of the present moment is, as the poet says, a sign of "Life's longing for itself" as Kahlil Gibran once said.

Daniel Stanton has answered that question Jesus asks very personally. "Who are you looking for?". He will answer it more publicly when I question him about his intention and his desire to serve God and his people in the priesthood.

Are you resolved to work with the bishop in caring for the flock of the Lord?

Are you resolved to celebrate the mysteries of Christ faithfully for the glory of God and sanctification of the God's people?

Are you resolved to consecrate your life to God for the salvation of his people?

“Who are you looking for?”. Mary Magdalene thought Jesus was the gardener until he called her name. Through this sacrament, Daniel is called by name and responds as Mary did: Rabbuni – Master.

But the priesthood is not just about my search for God and his discovery of me. Important though that is, the inner meaning of priesthood is the way in which the priest can guide and support, and comfort and challenge and transform the lives of the people he serves by offering the sacrifice Jesus himself offered – his Body, his Blood, poured out on the cross for the love of sinful humanity. The task of the ordained priest is to empower all those who are baptised to live and worship God in God's way, not our own. The bread and wine Daniel is given during this ceremony are the fruits of the labour of all those who come to worship God. God's action, re-presented during the Mass by the priest, transforms those gifts into the Holy Communion we share with God and with each other. Easier said than done - as all priests know. Hence the final question:

“Will you unite yourself more closely every day to Christ the High Priest, who offered himself for us to the Father as the perfect sacrifice?”.

And Daniel’s answer? “I am, with the help of God”.

I am so glad Daniel chose the extract from St. Paul’s letter to the Christians at Corinth for his ordination Mass. Corinth was the sin city of early Christian times. There is nothing new under the sun. Paul wades in with his teaching to the small Christian community in Corinth – or in Cardiff. “From now onwards we do not judge anyone by the standards of the flesh For anyone who is in Christ there is a new creation.... It is all God’s work through Christ and he given us the work of handing on this reconciliation”.

A privilege of the priesthood is reconciling people to God through the sacrament of forgiveness. At other times, the priest has to reconcile people with different views and outlooks and different demands, sometimes being the object of hostility and tension, especially when things go wrong and people have no one else to blame but God himself. Our new priest will be able to accompany those who honestly search for what is good and right and true in life and love, and support them when they fail. “Touch me”. And in his preaching and teaching, in his guidance and advice Daniel will encourage people to see even in the most challenging of circumstances, the opportunity to walk in the presence of God. From his own experience, he will teach them the truth of the words of R. S. Thomas in his poem called “Easter” speaking of the seeming absence of God:

“An absence so much richer
Than a presence, offering
An impalpable possibility
For faith’s fingertips to explore”

“Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to my Father. But go and tell the brothers, and sisters, that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God”. The task of a priest to ask the question and help people make their reply.

“Who are you looking for?”.