



Homily for the Ordination to the Priesthood of

Rev'd Robert James

2 June 2018 – Ss. Marcellinus & Peter

St. David's Cathedral, Cardiff

Archbishop George Stack

“We prove we are servants of God by great fortitude in times of suffering: in times of hardship and distress; when we are flogged, or sent to prison, or mobbed; labouring, sleepless and starving” (2 Cor 6:4-6). The ejection of six “priests” from a local pub a year ago pales into insignificance when compared with those words of St. Paul to the sophisticated population of Corinth! He was fighting for survival and the right to preach the gospel. He was belittled by a hostile Jewish audience, and probably some Greeks too. Even his fellow Christians were suspicious of his zealous preaching.

So, the words of the manager of that local hostelry one year ago have a resonance which goes back to apostolic times when he asked the six ‘so called priests’: *“Are you real?”* It is an unspoken question asked of the Church and of its priests, asked by many people in this complex world of ours. *“Are you real?”*. Is what you believe real? Is the ministry you undertake real? Is this something so real that you dedicate your life to it whilst the world looks on uncomprehending?

Before the Rite of Ordination, the candidate is questioned as to his beliefs, his love of God, his relationship with Jesus Christ, his willingness and capacity to serve God’s people, not just as an individual but as a priest of the Church. The

questions are probing and touch the deepest part of his person. They can only be really answered by one who has opened himself up to the love and forgiveness of God. One who is able to show that love in a sacrificial life of service. *“Are you real?”*. Does the life and teaching of Jesus transform your life so that in turn you can touch peoples’ lives in the great moments of joy and happiness as well as healing and sustaining them at times of deepest sadness and failure. Robert James will answer those questions, at least I hope he will, with a final *“I am, with the help of God”*. The bishop is then instructed to say to him: *“May God who has begun the good work in you bring it to fulfilment”*.

It takes six, or is it seven, years to prepare to become a priest. It takes about two hours to ordain one. But it takes a whole lifetime to become a priest, as all the priests participating in this ordination will testify. We are all still learning on the job because each new person, each new situation, each new question is unique in its longing and hoping for what is good and right and true. The prayer of Jesus in the gospel of John enfolds the one who is ordained to speak and act *“in persona Christi”*:

“Consecrate them in the truth;

Your word is truth.

I have sent them into the world,

And for their sake I consecrate myself

So that they, too, may be consecrated in the truth”

(Jn 17:17-19).

Words and actions go together in the life and ministry of the priest. He is a minister of Word and Sacrament. As a priest, Robert will have to speak a great deal -in preaching and teaching, in counselling and forgiving, in meetings and assemblies. Like all of us, he will probably use too many words because the more words we speak and the faster we communicate, the less we seem to understand. But he will know that in speaking of the things of God words are inadequate. The mystery of the love of God in Jesus Christ is too deep for words, goes beyond words. The Welsh poet R. S. Thomas put it well when he wrote:

*“He is such a fast
God, always before us and
Leaving as we arrive”*

That is why the Word of Jesus is not just spoken or written. He puts his word into action. He reveals God’s love to the point of death and beyond. “How much does God love me?” we often ask. “This much” says Jesus with arms outstretched on the cross.

The new priest is commissioned to re-present those truths each time he celebrates Mass and each time speaks God’s word to those in any need whatsoever. His task is to help people re-member in the midst of the brokenness of this world, to put back together in this time and in this place the living presence of the Risen Christ. The signs and symbols we use in this ordination remind him, and us, that he is not alone, that God will work in him and through him. The laying on of the hands of the bishop link him to the apostles, not least the martyrs of the 4th century, Marcellinus and Peter, whose feast we celebrate today. The anointing with the oil of Chrism, the oil named after Christ, the Anointed One. His life is sealed to be a sign of God’s presence to those whom he serves. The words of the Song of Songs might well be in his mind: *“Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your*

arm. For love is strong – as death” (Songs 8:6). The gifts to be offered to God, not just the work of human hands, but the gifts given to us by God himself – not least our precious lives and the stewardship of creation all transformed in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The priestly stole, a reminder of the words of Jesus that “My yoke is easy and my burden is light”. The priestly vestment, covering up our human weakness and fragility are a reminder of other words of St. Paul:

“And over all these things, clothe yourself in love”. (Col 3:14)

“Are you real?”. “After enquiry among the people of Christ and upon recommendation of those concerned with his training (and his family, and his family, his friends, those whose lives he has already touched) I testify that he has been found worthy”. His calling is a real one. The reality of the task ahead is enormous. That is why I pray:

“May God who has begun the good work in you bring it to fulfilment”. Amen
