Chrism Mass 020415

I find myself feeling that I need to speak more and more of vocation. People think that churches are in trouble today and that one of the biggest problem is an absence of vocations. To paraphrase the Gospel – ‘not so with us’. We have a good story to tell. We have people wanting to explore vocation – not enough to replace all of us who will be retiring in a while – but enough Dom is undertaking on our behalf a remarkable ministry as our Director of Ordinands. Alison has just become a 2/3 Provincial Director of Ordinands. . That’s an indication of the importance which we give as a church to encouraging, identifying, nurturing and supporting vocation.

And we are all part of that – on Easter IV – Good Shepherd Sunday – our church will mark a Vocations Sunday. It’s a day for speaking of, encouraging and praying for vocations. It sometimes sounds like active recruitment – sometimes like butterfly hunting. I think what we are trying to do is prayerfully to stir in the hearts of people of all kinds an inner dialogue in which they explore the presence and call of God in their lives

This is always an impressive service. There is a quietness about it as we each ponder the God-shaped journey which has brought us here. You will have your own thoughts. I share some of mine because it’s what I think about thankfully and reflectively. There is my great-grandfather, Rev John Dryden Smyllie, my two clergy grandfathers, David Chillingworth – who not surprisingly had no hair and had a bump in his nose – but was gentle to a fault not like me – and Ernest Bateman, passionate and turbulent and deeply involved in the story of Ireland post-Partition. And my mother who would have been ordained but for the misfortune of gender. And teachers and friends and clergy with and sometimes because of their faults. And the Troubles which began when I was 18. And my parishioners in Portadown with whom I lived through difficult times. And the extraordinary, unexpected story of how I came here to be your servant and to serve with you.

There is pain in all this as well. You will carry your share – the balancing of family life with ministry and sometimes unbalancing it. The pain of rejection and disappointment. Samuel gives them the shake of the head until David appears. That experience is part of the journey – certainly part of my journey where the first door always opened. It was the two or three after that which stayed firmly closed.

The readings set out what those whom God calls are like – modest clay jars so that they do not outshine their maker or their purpose. People who believe that greatness is a quiet and humble calling which comes through service.

There is one more thing which I carry in my heart today. It’s the unhappiness, distress and disease which I have seen among clergy these last few years. In the new Scottish Episcopal Institute, which I believe will lay foundations for our future ministry and therefore for the life of our church in the next generation, we are formation-focused. We speak of formation-led training. We seek to shape the lives of our future clergy and lay readers so that they are spiritually rooted and formed, so that they are equipped with the skills and professional learning which they need, so that they are emotionally strong – so that they can exercise leadership which is both authoritative and collegial and so that they can have the resilience which we all need. This is really important. Unhappy doctors are unsafe – so are unhappy airline pilots. And unhappy clergy cannot be for others what they are called to be.

So my prayer for myself and for all of you today …. That we can revisit together in heart and mind the passion, conviction and humility with which we started out on this extraordinary journey. That we can be content with our clay jars ordinariness so that what we offer can be about God and not about us. And most of all that we can model for a brutish and sometimes brutal society patterns of humility which show people how true greatness can be found not in what we grab hold of but in what we let go of

May God bless you.