CHRISM MASS

This service is one of those moments for me. As we come to renew our ordination vows, I check in with my own vocation - like clicking on that computer link which says 'system' hoping that I will find simplicity and fearing complexity. The question is whether and how the ministry which you and I have today connects to the beginning - when your sense of vocation was finely burnished and all was clear. Today I lift my hat – my mitre I suppose - to the simple vocation of the naïve person – ordained 40 years ago this year – who was sure he was called to be the saviour of Ireland and ended up here with you.

Today I celebrate the privilege of daily sharing the journey with you and others. We are vocationally rooted – but also strategically focused. We know what we are trying to do and how we are going to do it. Sometimes things which are sublime happen – the whisper in your ear says, ‘This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven’. Sometimes all is disaster and you walk across the rubble and broken glass of your hopes. Yet even then vocation against all the odds points you towards flickers of the redemptive power of God at work. When you prayed for me at our Clergy Conference you were in solidarity with me – recognizing that, while I too have sublime moments and times of great privilege in ministry, I also find myself part of things which are painful, hurtful and difficult. I do the extraordinary moments like the Primates Meeting. But I also do lots of meetings with Vestries. Sometimes, as last night, meetings which you expect to be really difficult turn out not to be because of the straightforward goodness of people.

'The spirit of the Lord is upon me.’ This is vocation for Jesus. Jesus is not express just an individualistic sense of calling which would speak of ‘my ministry’. He is firmly rooted in the tradition of faith – he knows where he comes from and what he is for. But he came unto his own and his own received him not. Isaiah places vocation in the context of a worshipping response to the glory of God – which stirs humility, unworthiness … and calling. I think that part of our growing up in vocation may be about recognizing – as Moses and the others did – that vocation flourishes in weakness and a sense of inadequacy as much as or more than in confidence and a feeling that we have strengths to offer.

So this is what I reflect on today.

I think about the divine tension in all ministry. Carefully, compassionately and respectfully we build relationships with people. Unless they trust us and even like us, we can do very little. And yet there is always that slight distance and apartness – and often that has pain and some rejection in it.

Like Jesus, we stand in a tradition – scripture, tradition and reason, we might say. We are the inheritors of the ministry of others. We are not the first and we will not be the last. It is not about us. And when we begin to think that it is about us – often because we feel acutely hurt and disappointed – we are at risk of being lost.

Part of that tradition is what increasingly we call ‘the narrative’. For us, for our congregations, for the SEC, for the church of God through the world, there is a narrative. Where do we come from, where are we now and what are we called to be? Where is God in the narrative – and how is it a narrative of faith? Our new training processes are stirring us to shape a narrative – in what kind of church will our increasing number of ordinands serve their ministry. The Columba Declaration stirs us to shape a narrative. We are not the national church and we certainly don’t do establishment. But are we a national church and what does that mean.

And linked to all that is the parallel strand of vocation – which is the vocation of our congregations. And I see tools like our MAP process which we are about to relaunch as part of how congregations get in touch with their own vocation.

I think I have learned over the years to think in ever more in connected ways. We need to see how things belong together and complement one another. We need to see how our vocation – which so strongly shapes our lives and the lives of our families – is not a solo run. But it is part of the great stream of God’s loving purposes and part of the story of how God’s people in every age and in this age respond to his call and his love.

To him be glory for ever and ever Amen