Ordination Sermon

It's a special moment for me to be here – in this church where I was ordained a deacon in 1976 - as we meet for Stephen's ordination to the priesthood - thank you to Bishop Alan for his invitation. I was glad to share in ministry with Steve in Seagoe and it's a great pleasure and honour to share this moment. It's taken a while to get here. There have been twists, turns and difficulties along the way. We grace such journeys with the word 'pilgrimage'. They are for our spiritual growth and strengthening. May it be so for Stephen. He will be the better priest because he has known pain and disappointment.

I read recently that there are only three things with which a priest should concern him or herself. They are the glory of God, the pain of the world and the renewal or repentance of the church. What - only three things - you ask as you ponder the latest e mail from the bishop suggesting that more, more is needed. More visiting, more congregational management, more money, more mission, more strategic planning, more formation of the whole people of God, more entrepreneurial zeal, more prophetic speaking, more, more.

But strangely the readings might have been chosen to reflect the three things I mentioned a moment ago – the glory of God, the pain of the world and the renewal or repentence of the church. St Paul prays in that wonderful phrase that we may have ‘the eyes of our heart enlightened’ – so that we may recognise glory. The Gospel reading speaks of the pain of the world – stranger, naked, sick, in prison – and of judgement on those who fail to care and in their failure fall short of their commitment to Christ.

This is not an easy time to be a priest. My task, like Bishop Alan's, is to work with clergy. Often we try to help faithful and tired clergy to rediscover the vocational passion which they once had. I often feel as if I am kneeling in front of the dying embers of the fire - delicately, delicately blowing as if with the wind of God - praying that I may see the tiny flicker of flame which says that all is not lost. And sometimes I see that. And sometimes I just get the ash blown back in my face.

And yet to be a priest is a most wonderful calling. The world may not value it. This is a society in which the priest is nothing. We are invisible. People don't know what we are for and don't value what we do. We meet the shrug of secular indifference. And yet in those moments when we connect - most of them well out of sight and out of the reach of the praise of people we fulfil our calling. For those to whom we minister the compassion of a loving Christ - those to whom we minister healing with love and authority - those to whom we make lightbulb connections which are clues for them in their search for meaning. For them we are everything.

In Scotland we are reshaping our training at the moment – striving to form priests who are holy, creative, resilient. I find myself coming back over and over again to words which Pope Francis shared with the Bishops of Brazil. He is talking about how we can commit ourselves fully to people and their needs while remaining focused on Christ. This is what he said:

‘It is important to devise and ensure a suitable formation,

One which will provide persons able to step into the night

Without being overcome by the darkness and losing their bearings;

Able to listen to people’s dreams without being seduced and to share their disappointments

Without losing hope and becoming bitter;

Able to sympathise with the brokenness of others without losing their own strength and identity’

And strangely he too is talking about those same three things. He’s talking about how the church can shape those who minister so that they can give themselves totally to people and their needs without losing sight of the glory of God. And that has to be what ministry is about. We do it falteringly, tentatively, - in those golden and holy moments which sometimes turn up at people's fire sides and at hospital bedsides in the middle of night - the church and it's significance falls away,

Of course the greatest place in which the Glory of God meets the pain of the world is in the cross of Jesus Christ. That above all is the moment at which an incarnate God, humble, obedient and suffering, takes to himself all the pain of the world that ever has been and ever will be and through it shows the glory of God.

We thank God today for Stephen’s calling to be a priest. We pray that God will work in him – keeping him spiritually alive and open, keeping the eyes of his heart enlightened and his heart big enough to reach out to those who suffer. May God’s will be done in him as he fulfils his calling.