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Ordination Charge to the Priests Peter-tide 2023

As you know I am just back from a sabbatical pilgrimage, walking in the footsteps of Francis. Along the way I found this...



If you haven't guessed already, it is a porcupine quill. Porcupines can be found in the wild in central Italy. I didn't get to see one, but I did see where it had been! It is amazing what we notice when we have time to do so.

On your retreat you will have been reflecting on the words of the Ordinal and the huge responsibility you take on as you are ordained priest. You will have considered all those meaningful images of servant, shepherd, steward, messenger... and sentinel. That image of 'sentinel' can often be overlooked. Therefore, in this Charge, I want you firstly, to heed those words which call us *'to watch for the signs of God's new creation'*. Be vigilant, take time, be intentional, in looking for signs of God's grace bringing new things to life, in you, and in the Church.

Last year I asked you to take time during your diaconal year to become aware of those hidden corners of the world that God might be calling you into. Where you might find Him already at work, and taking you into places that might be outside your comfort zone. As you are priested please continue that watchfulness and extend it into the way in which you nurture the gifts of those in your care. Where is God at work in them? What gifts might He be calling forth from them? How can you value and cherish the people in your care?

Our Dwelling in the Word passage for this year is from the book of Romans.

'We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.'

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil, cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.'

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another.'

Romans 12:6-16a

In the opening greeting of the service tomorrow, everyone will hear that...

'Priests are ordained to lead God's people in the offering of praise and the proclamation of the gospel. They share with the Bishop in the oversight of the Church, delighting in its beauty and rejoicing in its well-being.'

So, take delight in who you are and celebrate the beauty of those whom God has invited you to care for as His Church. As you take on the role of priest, please remember that your identity is not to be found in a stole rearranged, sacraments you can now offer, but rather the deepening understanding that you are a child of God. It doesn't require you to be perfect but rather to be truly yourself, seeking to be continually formed into the human being God has made and called, and who authentically reflects the image of Christ.

While I was walking the way of Francis, I was very aware of my sore hips as we covered the miles, up and down some very steep gradients. I realised yet again my own human frailty. It was a reminder not only of the ageing process but that there are many things I am unable to do well. My gifts are not boundless and there are many who will do a better job than I in certain areas. That is the beauty of being part of a community, a family of faith, the body of Christ. Your ministry as priest is not yours alone. We are part of the priesthood of all believers and yet with a very specific role amongst them. We are called to exercise our gift and to ensure that there is room for others to grow in theirs too.

It won't always be a fully functioning body! Just as Christ carried in his body the wounds of His love so we each exhibit something of those marks of grace. Not only the strengths but also the weaknesses of such love. There will be moments when we rejoice in all that God is doing and there will be times when the only possible response is to weep.

In the words of the Ordinal priestly ministry brings with it the privilege of calling '*their hearers to repentance and to declare in Christ's name the absolution and forgiveness of their sins. With all God's people, they are to tell the story of God's love.*' We can only do that if we know the mercy of God in our own lives. It requires us to be real and vulnerable before God. To allow Him to help us discern what is personal sin that requires our repentance; or an area of weakness that needs opportunity for development. And also, to help us to recognise those things which we feel as unnecessary burdens but which are in fact the wounds of Christ we are asked to carry.

Words from the Ordinal...

'They are to set the example of the Good Shepherd always before them as the pattern of their calling. With the bishop and their fellow presbyters, they are to sustain the community of the faithful by the ministry of word and sacrament, that we all may grow into the fulness of Christ and be a living sacrifice acceptable to God.'

There are four particular challenges which I leave with you from our Romans passage which will aid you in your ministry and us as the Church to grow into that fulness of Christ.

The call for us to be **sincere in love**. A couple of years ago our Dwelling passage was from Colossians and we were reminded to 'clothe ourselves with love'. Love doesn't come easily. There are some difficult people to love! Love sometimes has to be learnt. Seeking to see people as God sees them is the beginning of that journey. Look for the good in others, honour what God is revealing.

Be joyful in hope. We know from the story of Nehemiah that the joy of the Lord is our strength. His task seemed an impossible one, to rebuild a broken city with opponents all around seeking to tear it down again. His wasn't a naïve joy however. He held onto a hope in a God that had called him for this purpose. We, who have come after the life, death and resurrection of Christ can more fully appreciate where that hope is founded. So let us be people of joy and hope! Always remember the abundance of God's love, mercy, and grace.

However, the people of Nehemiah's era, those early Roman Christians, and now we too, live in a real world where there is much suffering, pain, and difficulty. War in Ukraine, the economic crisis, the natural and human disasters of our time, all mitigate to cause anxiety and fear. And this calls us also to be **patient in affliction**. There are no quick fixes and so alongside rejoicing with those who rejoice, we are called to mourn.

Finally, it is that fourth challenge that will sustain us. **Be faithful in prayer**. You will have heard me say during the course of your ordination journey that priests are called to pray for the people of God and to teach them how to pray. This is one of the simplest and yet most profound spiritual practices for each of us. Words are not always required; a listening heart is. Don't neglect time to be in the presence of God. It is often the first thing to be sacrificed in a busy diary. Frequently I hear that where breakdown of relationships have happened between clergy colleagues that prayer together has been overlooked. Make the space. Make the time.

Tomorrow you will make declarations, promises that will affirm your commitment to take on such challenges. And we will pray that by the grace of God you will be able to fulfil such promises and '*that as you daily follow the rule and teaching of our Lord and grow into his likeness, God may sanctify the lives of all with whom you have to do*'.

May you know the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as you follow Him!

With much thankfulness, love and prayer for you all

+ Ruth

