

23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday (C)

8<sup>th</sup> September 2019

‘20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Priesthood’

Wis 9: *as for your intention, who could have learnt it, had you not ... sent your Holy Spirit?* Philemon: *I am in the chains the Good News has brought me.*  
Lk 14:25–33: the unfinished tower ... the king marching to war ...

The opening hymn at Mass today (‘Follow Me’) is a hymn that I distinctly recall learning whilst at secondary school — Nicholas Breakspear School, in St Albans. If my memory serves me correctly, we learnt it as part of a mission that was given by the Holy Ghost Fathers. I can’t remember how old I was exactly, perhaps the middle years of secondary school. But it stands out, as it spoke to me in a special way, and reinforced in me even then the conviction that the Lord was calling me to serve Him in priestly ministry. It was probably the best part of 20yrs later that I was actually ordained, but still — the working of the Holy Spirit, His gentle calling to us to do His will, operates in unknown ways. It can be through a hymn, a word of Scripture, a moment of peace in the sublime beauty of creation, a gentle moment in His presence at Adoration of the Holy Eucharist. For me, in part at least, it was those words: “Follow Me, follow Me.”

As the Lord says in the Gospel, often, and in today’s passage, following Him properly demands sacrifices and a simplicity of life, and this demand in particular is expected

of His priests. Jesus speaks of taking up our Cross daily to follow Him, and of giving up all our possessions. His dramatic language — as so often in the Gospel — grabs our attention, and urges us to ‘listen up’! His message, surely, is to make our priorities clear — to place our relationship with the Lord above all other things, as it is the most blessed aspect of life, to know, love & serve the Son of God. Even if (and when) all else fails, He will not. Our faith cannot fail — it is set on heaven, and neither lack of material goods here on earth, nor health, nor worldly success, have any impact on that. The only thing that matters is being firm in faith, devout in prayer, determined to model Christ to others by a gentle yet fervent love.

At any time of a significant anniversary, it is good both to give thanks, and to take stock, and to be renewed in one’s enthusiasm and commitment. To celebrate a 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of priesthood is, please God, to be at a sort-of midway point between ordination and the age at which one would expect to offer one’s resignation from full-time parish ministry and responsibility. It’s a time to give thanks

for all those whom one was able to assist in faith, through teaching, the sacraments, pastoral help. Some of those one will continue to know from year to year; others pass in and out of one's life very transiently (I think in particular of all those patients and families whom I would have encountered over 5+ yrs in hospital ministry). Please God, the work of Christ can be done through each and every priest, the blessings of the Lord especially through Baptism, the Holy Eucharist, Confession. It is the Lord's work, and a priest is but His vessel, His minister, a channel of His grace. But he should work hard to fulfil that calling that the Lord made; he should take up the Lord's Cross, make the efforts that befit the priesthood, offer a simplicity of life, continue faithfully serving the people. The Lord never in the Gospel hides the challenges; He never tries to deceive and suggest that the Christian life — or a priestly ministry — is without its sacrifices. But He repeats endlessly the fruits of these sacrifices: the happiness, the blessedness, that is beyond this world. For this we must all strive, priest and people, minister and parish, together, never trying to make the

Christian life just a thing of ease, or a mere label, but a truly deep-down conversion of life, that actually puts Our Lord first in every day, in every decision.

Our Blessed Lady is always a perfect guide to what it means to live the life intended by Christ. On this 8<sup>th</sup> Sept — feast of her birthday — we ask her prayers to help us to return each day to that reflection which is central to a good life. 'Am I close to Jesus?' 'Am I doing His will?' 'What more need I do to love Him?' Our Lady's own life had its fair share of 'carrying the Cross.' Remember what Simeon said to her in the Temple as she brought the newborn Jesus into the Father's house: "And a sword shall pierce your own soul, too." But Mary carried those times of fear and suffering as she knew that closeness to Jesus was the only solution worth putting faith in. Nothing and no-one else would provide her, or humanity, its meaning and purpose. She is Mother of the Church, Mother of each priest: may she convince us every day that to follow Jesus, crosses and all, is the greatest thing to give one's life to, the happiest offering of a human life, the best possible path to choose.