

Ebbsfleet Chrism Mass

Pusey House, Oxford

30 March 2021



When Peter saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, he said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about this man?' Jesus said to him, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!'

John 21.21-22

Dear Brothers in the Priesthood,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,
Dear Friends,

this celebration would in normal times be a great concelebration, a moment in the year towards which all priests look, to share with their bishop and one another a moment of singular joy.

Today though, for reasons that we all know about, it cannot be like that. But in order that the sheer exhaustion and low-level depression that most of us feel will not dull what is great and mysterious we needed to keep this specific celebration, even in this scaled down way, so that, before celebrating the Paschal liturgies, we have an opportunity to recall that moment when our Blessed Lord placed His hands upon us, and made us share in the mystery of His own life – the moment when He began to exercise his priesthood through us, to offer Himself through us, to minister to others through us.

One feature of this year, which I have heard time and again in the often-moving testimony of fellow priests, has been what we might call the underlying anxiety of comparison. Against the ever-changing backdrop of public policy, we have attempted to adapt our duties and habits to meet the needs of our congregations and the wider community. And while there has been

opportunity to discover new means of communication and coordination to promote the Church's worship and service in the wider population, and adapt ourselves to the new and bewildering physical and spiritual needs of our neighbours, worry and distress have crouched low and slid into our lives. There is an intense sense of looking at others – other priests, other parishes, of marking oneself against them, assessing their responses to our common emergency, sparking jealousy, judgement, self-appraisal, and for many self-doubt. And if your parish was beginning to feel vulnerable *before* last year, deep-seated tiredness now, and a foreboding about impacts we cannot yet appreciate, will be leaving you deeply in need of the Lord's reassurance and encouragement.

Such was the background to the encounter between Jesus and Peter that took place on the shore of Lake Tiberias after the resurrection. The conversation is recounted by the one who witnessed it: St John the Evangelist. In the Greek text there is a very revealing play on two words: *filéo*, the love the lives in friendship, tender but not all-embracing; and *agapáo*, the love that is without reserve, condition or limit.

Jesus asks Peter the first time: 'Simon ... do you love me (*agapas-me*)' – do you love me totally and unconditionally? (Jn 21.15) Prior to his experience of betraying and denying Jesus, we know from all Peter's behaviour that he would certainly have answered Jesus's question, 'Yes Lord; totally; to the end!' But now, intensely aware of his own weakness and infidelity, he answers, 'Lord, you know that I love you (*filo-se*): that is, 'I love you just as much as I can'.

Christ probes his heart: 'Simon ... do you *agapas-me*?' – do you love with total love, more than others?' And Peter repeats, 'I love you just as much as I can'. The third time Jesus *lowers* the bar: 'Simon ... *fileis-m*?' and though he's humiliated to be so well understood, Peter understands that the love he can *credibly* profess is *enough* for Jesus. Jesus had stooped to put himself on Peter's level, and from then on Peter follows Jesus aware of his own fragility; and for this very reason he can be the shepherd of lost lambs and sheep.

But then suddenly Peter becomes interested in John, the disciple whom Jesus *agapa* (loved unconditionally), the Beloved Disciple. 'Lord, what will become of *him*?' Read the gospels carefully and you will recognize the theme of comparison between the two apostles on many occasions. Jesus gives Peter a stern but clear reply: 'If I want Him to remain until I come, what does it matter to you? You follow me!' (Jn 21.21 – 2). Peter must accept the Lord's will that his ministry will be different from John's. He *will* learn to love unconditionally; but to do so he must submit to the Lord's will for him, and *not* compare himself to the one who throughout the Gospel he *has* compared himself to. In a beautiful meditation on these verses, full of contrasts between the discipleship of the two apostles, St Augustine says: 'On the level of symbol, Peter followed Christ soonest, John waited. But on the level of *lived faith*, both endured the present sufferings of this miserable world, both awaited the future goods of eternal bliss.'

The point I want to make, quite simply dear brother priests, is that for each of us the promise of what Jesus gives us in the priesthood is the same, but the *path* that each one must take to discover oneself in the mystery of Jesus Christ is *unique*, the working of grace in each heart. He is always the One who gives, who draws us to Himself, and we must pay attention to the *way* He calls us,

and the particular share in His cross that He gives us. These are things that we shall not discover or understand if we squander our ministries comparing ourselves, our parishes, our successes, or even our failures, to others.

In the sacramental sign of the imposition of hands by the bishop – and for some of you those hands were mine! – it was the Lord Himself who laid His hands upon you. That sign – the outstretched hand of Christ to choose you, anoint you, and hold you – sums up the entire process not only of the fulfilment of your duties to the Church, but of God's grace in bringing you to perfection through the totality of your priestly service. He is guiding you from a position of loving Him only as much as you can, to loving Him without reserve, condition or limit.

Like the first disciples, we each heard His call, 'Follow me!' and I have no doubt that since then you have occasionally wondered if you heard properly. Perhaps, we have at times been frightened by the size of the task and our inadequacy (Lk 5.8); or terrified at the roaring storms of ideology and self-destruction in the world where God has seen fit to put us (Mt 14.30).

As the pandemic subsides, there is no doubt that we are facing many new challenges and opportunities. The agenda for the Church, and the need for her vigorous and sacrificial witness to the Gospel, has never been greater. And yet at this very point, when much is needed from the Church, in the midst of a culture in flight from God, and therefore in flight from all that God created and re-created humanity to be, we feel exhausted and ill-prepared to meet the Lord's summons to us. It is for that reason, we must turn to Him, aware of our inadequacy, and heed His warning, do not be distracted, 'You, follow me!' Learn to give everything for love beyond what you think you are capable of.

Many of you will recall some words that will have been used by the bishop at so many of your ordinations: 'Imitate the mystery you celebrate: model your life on the mystery of the Lord's cross.' The priest is one who is uniquely inserted into the mystery of Christ's sacrifice through a *personal* identification with Him, in order to *extend* Christ's mission, His word, His touch, His self-offering. It is through this union, which happens in the sacrament of orders, that you become closer to Christ and the mystery of the Lord's cross through your generous response to Him. This is why you answered the bishop at your ordination, 'I am willing, with the help of God'.

Many priests – probably increasing numbers of priests – have a fear of appearing to be strangers to the world, anxious that the world will not recognize *itself* in them. It seems to me, and I want to say this with all my heart, you should fear instead being a stranger to Christ, and the world not noticing or recognizing *Him* in you. At its root that means *identifying* yourself with Jesus. He is the root of our priesthood. Jesus warned Peter: 'What is that to you? You follow me!' That admonition to Peter, and to each of us, dear brothers, implies two things above all others.

First, that if you do not above all things imitate – no! better to say, *share* – Jesus's intimacy with the Father, you are lost. You need to go *far away* from the projections and demands of the world, even sometimes from the neediness of the institutional church, and find the Father in prayer and solitude, in contemplation and silence, in adoration and trust. We need to spend more time in prayer, scaling inner mountains to be with the Father. You cannot give from what you do not

possess. How can you lead a community in its prayer and service, if you do not yourself remain constantly in deep and intimate contact with the Lord by taking time to be in His presence? Besides, if the well has run dry people will not come to you to drink.

And second, our whole call as priests is to learn how to model our lives on the mystery of the Lord's cross: how to move from conditional to unconditional love; to give our flesh and blood, not just our intellect and energy and zeal and compassion. He who said, 'When I am lifted up from the earth will draw all men to myself' shows us authentic Christian leadership. This God must live in us and we in Him. In the words of one priest martyr of our century, 'One becomes capable of salvation only by offering one's own flesh. The evil in the world must be borne, and the pain shared, assimilating it into one's own flesh as Jesus did.'

Throughout the gospel Peter and John appear alongside one another. Bit by bit each one's distinctive call emerges, and the cross within it: the one as chief shepherd, the other as eye-witness to the truth. In their haste to reach the empty tomb, the Fathers of the Church recognized an exhortation to compete in the only legitimate race between believers: the competition to seek Christ. Brothers, encourage one another in running *that* race!