HOMILY FOR THE ORDINATION OF SEAN HANILY AS DEACON

CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL, DUBLIN

17th September 2017

MARC WHELAN C.S.Sp.

Readings: Isaiah 6: 1-8; Romans 12: 1-12; Mark 10: 35-45.

We have, in the Gospel that we have just heard proclaimed, a prime example of ‘Parish Pump Discipleship’. James and John, sons of Zebedee, are part of a group walking with Jesus and probably struggling with the question of whether they should continue to follow him. They have seen him heal the sick and have heard his teaching. Perhaps there is something stirring within their hearts that is leading them to making an important decision for the future direction of their lives.

So, they leave the group and come alone to Jesus. They don’t really need the others and, to be honest, at this moment the others in the group would probably be a hindrance – especially given what the two men have to say to Jesus. Their request is quite simple: it is to occupy the most privileged seats and be the first in God’s kingdom that Jesus is proclaiming in word and deed. Or, to be more precise, to occupy the best seats in Jesus’ house – as they imagine it.

In fact, their petition is not really an asking but a ridiculous and ungrounded ambition. It is in the line of that great Irish request: ‘Would you ever do me a favour?’ I suppose today’s equivalent would be taking a man aside in the bar and asking: ‘You wouldn’t have a ticket for Croke Park for this afternoon would you – preferably one with corporate entertainment? And if you have two, sure that would be grand.’

This is a very appropriate Gospel for today’s ordination and offers each of us a salutary reflection on our own struggles with discipleship.

John and James are close to Jesus. John is the disciple that Jesus loved and James would be the first apostle martyr now venerated by so many pilgrims walking the Camino de Santiago.

I have to confess a certain affinity with James having just returned from pilgrimage where, with a few companions, I walked from the tomb of the apostle in Santiago to Finisterre – the ends of the earth. From the shrine of the martyr to the wide expanse of ocean and a horizon of new beginnings.

But perhaps this affinity also comes from a certain sympathy with James’ position when a surprised Jesus says to the two petitioners: ‘You do not know what you are asking’. The pilgrim knows something of this unknowing when setting off, and thinking this seemed like a good idea when, a few months ago, we talked about a pleasant walk through the Galician countryside of Northern Spain.

‘You do not know what you are asking.’ No doubt today’s candidate, Sean, who has presented himself today for ordination has thought about this long and hard as he journeyed through his training and preparation for ministry.

I belong to a Catholic Community, Spiritan Missionaries – the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. Part of our traditional understanding of religious profession in the Congregation is that we gift our lives knowing that the future unfolding of this life is unknown to us and is not in our hands. And so, we try and live a life of grace. Because grace is the only way we can live our lives. For ordination, this is the same process. You are offering yourselves for ministry, service of the people of God, whether Christian or not, following the example of Christ.

So, while I do not expect, Sean, that you fully understand the question, nor, I suspect, does anyone of us here fully understand it, it is worth repeating: ‘Do you know what you are asking?’. Believing in your heart that God has called you to be deacon in the Church of Christ.

Sean, we pray with you and for you. We pray in the words of the opening prayer that you will be given ‘the needful gifts of grace’.

Grace is given to each one of us. Indeed, the time we live in is a time of grace. St. Paul in the letter to the Romans outlines some of the graced gifts that the community receives through each other: prophecy, practical service, teaching, leadership and governance, the work of mercy. And, he adds, let these gifts be shared in love.

Our two friends, indeed brothers, James and John, are nothing less than generous in their response to Jesus. Yes, they are able to drink the cup that Jesus drinks and be baptized with the baptism that Jesus is baptised with. While the cup and baptism evoke the two great sacraments of eucharist and baptism there is also something unnerving about what Jesus is asking, a sense that something dramatic and life changing is also being asked of us.

‘Jesus came among his own but his own did not receive him’, John writes in his gospel. The world does not receive its poor, its refugees, its homeless, its little ones, those who are prophets of the Kingdom. By sharing the cup of blessing and the cup of suffering Jesus reminds those who would follow him that this can be a bitter cup.

Yes, grace is given to us but there is such a thing as dark grace. We see it in the experience of trauma and suffering. We see it on our paths of conversion. Perhaps we see it more in our journeying and relationships then in the moment for often this dark grace is the fruit of a painful path of discovery and discipleship.

I suppose like the sons of Zebedee our own lives are woven around the various commitments we make throughout our lives with a generous ‘Yes I do’. We take on discipleship, the following of Christ because something in our hearts has been touched and stirred. But there is also that shadow side that Paul knew so well: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do...” (Rm 7:15).

The sons of Zebedee want the best seats on either side of Jesus’ throne. They want to choose their relationship with Jesus rather than Jesus and life choosing them. On Calvary Jesus’ throne will be his cross and on his right and left will be not two apostles but two brigands. Two people who represent our humanity which is at once sinful and welcoming of Christ’s love.

Today’s ordination is a ritual expression of Christ the servant of a new humanity. Traditionally the deacon is the servant of the Holy Table of Eucharist. In my own Roman tradition, as the permanent diaconate faded away in the early centuries, I often suspect that it was restored not by the hierarchy but by the many apostolic religious men and women – especially women – who exited the quiet tranquillity of the cloister to minster to the poor, the vulnerable and weak. Nourished at the table they did not stay at it but went out to serve and share its fruit. Is this not *Diaconia*?

For the ministry of diaconate that you have accepted today with all your heart is something that, despite its institutional aspect of being *ordered* to the building up of Christ’s church, must also become something porous in your life. It is a life made up of openings where contact and ministry to the poor and outcast – those people who Jesus delighted in dining with but who often find little place at our table – opens your heart and spirit to the spaciousness of God’s spirit alive and life-giving in your heart and in your ministry. Often times these openings are also the chinks that represent our own vulnerability and fragility. But as Leonard Cohen sings: through these cracks the light gets in.

As we listen to the words of Jesus in the gospel today we hear him inviting us to share in his baptism. This is the other pole of our liturgy today. Diaconate, like the orders of priests and bishops is rooted in baptism. Baptism is the source of our ministry and it is what unites us all in the one Body of Christ with its different members. The ministry of the church is for all the baptised.

In the domain of the healing profession, one often hears the question: Who counsels the counsellors? Who heals the doctors? In church, less often do we hear the question who will minister to the ministers? Ministry, service can be a source of hubris and pride but it can also lead to an exhaustion of our energies and capacities to give. We ministers also need shepherding.

A retired French Bishop, Albert Rouet, recounts a visit he made to Mossul, Syria in the years before the war. He was there for Holy Thursday and took part in the Syriac liturgy of the day. The bishop who was celebrating, washed the feet of twelve members of the congregation and then returned to his chair and the same twelve people came up to wash the bishop’s feet. When the liturgy was over the Syriac bishop asked the Frenchman: “Why do you Latins not follow the Gospel? Did you see what happened there? I washed the feet of these people and they washed my feet. In the Gospel it is written ‘You must wash each other’s feet.’ Why do you forget that reciprocity of the Gospel?”.

Ordained deacon you do not escape an ecclesial status nor will the church build itself exclusively through your labour. The Church is not at the service of its ordained ministers. But you have an immensely symbolic role because you are ordered, ordained for the building up of Christ’s body here on earth so that same body will continue to be sent out into the world as sign and promise of God’s kingdom.

We are all companions of James and John. Let’s not criticize them too much for seeking the good seats beside the Lord. There but for the grace of God… But let us remember the extraordinary logic of the Gospel spoken to us by Jesus: The first will be last and the last first, that it is only by giving of ourselves that we can receive and it is in dying to ourselves that we find fullness of life.