



CELEBRATION OF THE GOLDEN JUBILEE OF PRIESTHOOD

BISHOP LES TOMLINSON

**ST GREGORY THE GREAT CHURCH, DONCASTER
21 AUGUST 2022**

Isa 66:18-21; Ps 117:1-2; Heb 12:5-13; Luke 13:22-30

Today it is my honour and privilege to celebrate this significant 50th anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood, in this beautiful church of St Gregory the Great. I am most grateful to the parish priest, Fr Charles Balnaves who has graciously made this possible and for the parishioners for their support.

I thank each one here today for joining me in thanking the Lord for His gift to me of fifty years of priestly ministry. Most of all, the love and support of family and friends has been a constant gift to me, and I am humbled to think of all the support I have received during those years!

In the Jewish tradition a Jubilee was celebrated every seventh year and a Great Jubilee year every fifty. The Jubilee Year was inaugurated by blowing a trumpet. I do not propose to blow my own trumpet today on *my* Jubilee! I decided to preach the homily myself in case someone else would attempt to blow it for me and be forced to exaggerate the truth or even to invent! I feel humbled by the kindness of priests, my family, friends and parishioners of St Gregory's who have honoured me with this Mass of Thanksgiving and the many good wishes – with occasional "*ad multos annos*".

You will forgive me if I take the opportunity to reminisce, as my thoughts go back to that wonderful day when I received the Sacrament of Holy Orders. I was ordained to the priesthood for the Archdiocese of Melbourne, by Bishop Ronald Mulkearns at St Joseph's Church, Red Cliffs on 18 August 1972. Following my ordination, for over three decades I served in numerous parishes, in the Archdioceses of Melbourne and Hobart until, in 2003, Archbishop Hart appointed me as Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral. Then some four months later, as Vicar-General of the Archdiocese.

Then, as many of you know, on 5 May, 2009 I was appointed by Pope Benedict XVI as Titular Bishop of Siniti and Auxiliary Bishop of Melbourne and was ordained a bishop at St Patrick's Cathedral,



Melbourne on 17 June, 2009. Some two and a half years later, on 3 February, 2012, Pope Benedict XVI appointed me as Bishop of Sandhurst, where I served for seven and a half years until my retirement in 2019.

Since my ordination, I have baptised, confirmed, blessed marriages and buried many of my parishioners, and I have offered daily Mass nearly every day for the past half century. During these years of service, I have been loved and cared for and made at home by the many parishioners who have become dear friends. And so, with gratitude to each and every one of you, I welcome you all here today, family and friends who have supported me so strongly on my journey as Priest. To love God and to love God's people is at the very centre of a priest's existence. To live that out in prayer and service, is the way that priests make sense of their life and find meaning.

I am sure that my brother priests will all agree that we recall vividly the day of our Ordination to the Priesthood. It is impossible for us to forget because we were about to become priests, ordained to walk in the footsteps of Christ. Perhaps some of us went forward with dreams that were never realised, churches that were never built, ambition that was never satisfied. Nevertheless, in the middle of it all, for me, there was always a certain sense of being supported by God who helped me do good deeds; some that I remember, others that have been remembered by parishioners of the past who touched my life and, in more recent years, have expressed some gratitude for deeds I had forgotten.

There are so many things on which I could reflect today, so many changes that have taken place, in society, in our sense of self, in how we build community, in the Church. These years are times of brightness and shadow as, in fact, are all times. However, the readings of our Mass push me insistently, and gently, to one theme above all, a theme which is so central to our faith and to my journey: the theme of the presence and mystery of God in our lives.

In fact, today's Gospel reading tells of Jesus' advice to the disciples sent on a mission: he told them to travel light, to trust in God, to need little. The same approach would always carry on to their way of living. Over the 50 years of my priesthood, I have come to realise that growth in discipleship does truly seem to be more a matter of letting go than of gaining; of surrendering than of controlling; of learning



to accept one's powerlessness and total need before God, rather than of trying to look good and to be in a position of strength.

Jesus used an image for the point of entry to the experience of ultimate salvation: *the narrow doorway*. What mattered for Jesus was that disciples truly listen to him, shape their lives according to his values and learn to love. Anything else served only to inflate the self-image and make entry through the narrow doorway impossible.

And so, my friends, as I mark the Golden Jubilee of my priesthood, it is a wonderful occasion when I celebrate a life of faith commitment and love of God and His people. However, I have known that in difficult moments, it has been God's grace that has sustained me; but I have had to say *Yes* to that grace.

So, today I ask that with me, you give thanks for God's grace and for my *Yes*. In the last fifty years, especially after Vatican II, priests have been confronted by all sorts of challenges to themselves and to their authority and to their lives and their ministry. As a priest now for over 50 years, I have tried to meet those challenges.

A jubilee is but a staging post, a moment to reflect on a journey thus far, to try to grasp its gifts, its lessons. It is also a time in which to take a glimpse of all that lies ahead. Each year the Feast of Christmas sums this up: Jesus' desire to be with us, to greet us with outstretched arms, to draw us to himself and to be for us, the true pathway home. This feast so tenderly discloses the beauty of the mystery of God, a beauty inscribed in each one of us, the beauty that will find its fulfilment in God's good time.

As I reflect and try to take that glimpse ahead, I am reminded again of the oft quoted words of St Theresa of Avila, which are appropriate for all baptised Christians, but perhaps especially to priests: *Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now.*

So, I do look back in gratitude for my call to the priesthood! As I get older, time seems to pass so much more quickly; and my sense of joy and happiness is matched by an ever-keener sense of the mystery



of life with the burdens and struggles we all bear and that we all must face. My ministry as bishop and pastor is lived in this awareness.

Our very short, but inspirational psalm in today's reading, brings us in as joint heirs with Christ to join our voices with those who praise His name – such a beautiful summary today for the celebration of my Golden Jubilee:

Praise the Lord,

*For great is his steadfast love towards us,
and the faithfulness of the Lord endures for ever.*

Praise the Lord!

So let us all rejoice in him, now and always.