

RETREAT AT AMPLEFORTH: FOUR

This is the third full day, and having contemplated the hearing of the Word, and its proclamation, we will today try to think about what the practice of our preaching demands of us in personal terms.

God did not take an angel to himself, says Hebrews: he took descent from Abraham. In doing this he installed, at the heart of the Redemption itself, the paradox which Donald Nichol perceived in relation to his own cancer: *risk*. Just as there is risk at Creation, so in the mode God chose for Redemption there is a whole minefield of risk. The presence of Judas at the Last Supper is an obvious indicator of this; but so is the presence of Simon Peter, of you, and of me.

How close was the call? It depends how you read a whole *florilegium* of very important texts involving that Greek word we studied a little while ago: *peirasmos*, testing. *Out into the wilderness to be tested by Satan...who departed, to return at the appointed time...pray not to be put to the test...his sweat fell to the ground in great drops, like blood...tested in every way that we are, he did not sin...and, most precious of all to me, The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak*. I am quite convinced that Jesus was speaking of his own time of testing, rather than that of the sleepy disciples. He was coming to them for support, and they were asleep like people who have no conception that a crisis is afoot. If this is truly what the evangelists want to convey, then we can believe that, in the very heart of Christ himself - somewhere in the space between *the spirit, which alone gives life, and the flesh, that has nothing to offer* - the call was very close indeed in the hour of crisis.

In meditating about this element of risk in the mystery of salvation, we may find the right setting for a meditation about our being entrusted with the work of the Diaconate, and thus with the fate of our congregations.

I'd like here and now to salute and honour your devotion to the long course we have gone through. You have shown great elasticity, and a measure of devotion, which has convinced those who are training you about *the willingness of the spirit*. But it is good also to remind ourselves that ordination is no prize-day. It is a day of commissioning, and the new conditions of life afterwards are the subject of our thinking today.

In any human enterprise now would be the time to take stock, to look at our qualifications and add up the accounts. But the Gospels see it differently, and human accounts are disqualified in the Gospels' auditing. As we approach the start of our ministry, we might notice how apostles become qualified - and how disqualified - in the Gospels.

Luke makes his points about commissioning and discipleship around the figure of Peter. Let us look at some of his stories about this chief apostle. Let the experience of Peter display his misunderstanding of the way God works, constantly frustrating his real grasp of the Gospel and his own rôle in it.

Twice Peter confesses his sinfulness in Luke. The first in his boat, when he says: *Lord, leave me, I am a sinful man*. The second, leaving the high priest's palace, where *going out he wept bitterly*. Jesus' response to the first is to tell him of his apostolic commission: *I will make you a fisher of men*. But that does not prevent his constantly failing to get the point: and it is when his own view of what is happening is finally broken - in the palace of the high priest - that he receives his certificate of authenticity as a disciple of Christ. And this is the moment when he

feels he has lost everything.

If a *disciple who has lost everything* can also be called *the Rock on whom I will build my Church*, we are once more in the realm of irony. Irony works where the obvious meanings are sliding apart to reveal a contrasting and contradictory reality shining more brightly. For us, who are Christ's ministers in the twentieth century, there is the same possibility. We have tried to acquire the strengths we need to proclaim Christ. God, however, may not choose our human strengths, but rather our weaknesses, to build his Church. The possibility is always there, and we should entertain the thought that we might be here to represent the weakness of God, stronger than human strength. The way we go about it is all-important.

Our ministry does not work through glorious instant holiness. It is a mucky, imperfect, struggling business. The Cross does not work through moral brilliance: it is a gibbet, the death of a convict. Nor does our ministry work through grace or charm: it is a matter of telling truth, often painfully and with personal hardship - just as the Cross is violent and brings human dignity utterly to ruins. Our ministry bears witness to the Cross, not in polished scholarly phrases, but with its tears and sweat; just as the Cross does not rely on intellectual light: it is a brutal expedient, a steam-hammer of destruction. There is nothing left after Calvary for human beings' retrieval; everything is lost. We should not waste time grubbing through the remains, but understand that *resurrection* - that most utterly impossible of paths - is the only way forward.

So Peter's moment of grace was really the least likely: the point where, in human terms, he joined his master *in weakness: going out, he wept bitterly*. Peter will take no further part in the Passion story. His Jesus has accomplished in him all that is needful. There is nothing left to retrieve, and only the Resurrection will mark his return to the narrative.

That is the point at which we, too, can learn the primacy of love, which will enable us to put our ordination into practice by a ministry *not* founded on our gifts but on the free and undeserved gift of God's love in Christ. Remember all that slog of Pauline studies, learning that no amount of law-keeping can earn us a place in the Kingdom? That was the point, in Paul's terms, that comes to Peter so devastatingly in the collapse of his own faith. Jesus the strong leader, the Christ, the Master, teaches Peter wordlessly, on his face in the garden, in chains before the priests. Peter's *strength* was not wanted, was Satan, Man's way but not God's; his sword was a stupid irrelevance (*and touching the man's ear, he healed him*).

Against your better judgment, you must let the Lord wash your feet. You must let Christ turn and look at you when you have denied him and disowned him, with the love which says that he has always known you, that you are already forgiven. You must let the Lord die for you. Then you may qualify to hear the question: *Do you love me more than these others?* and the following command, that is both an absolution and a gift: *Feed my lambs! Look after my sheep!*