

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER.

St John's Bath 2011.

Readings:

Acts 6:1-7; 1 Peter 2; 4-9; John 14:1-12.

PRAYING FOR VOCATIONS>

I suppose that we pray most enthusiastically for what we really want. But then, our faith tells us, we must add this qualification 'Thy will be done' – 'O Lord not what I want but, in the end, what you want.' And that adds a touch of uncertainty to it all. Last Sunday we prayed for Vocations. I suppose that what we really wanted was mainly more priests. At the moment it is a matter of spreading ever more thinly the dwindling number that we have, trying to make them, as they say. 'Go round'. And round and around they go, running ever harder just to keep things going. Perhaps the time has come to stop and ask 'What are all these priests really for?'

In most religions there are priests. The priest is often seen as the 'pontifex', the bridge-builder, the one whose job it is to connect heaven and earth, God and humanity. So these priests are into that whole bustling world of religion, reciting prayers, performing rituals, making sacrifices – all to fashion that Bridge. Now, the Christian faith takes this world of religion but then turns it upside down. You can read about this 'turning upside down' this revolution, in that great Letter to the Hebrews. Does God really get connected with us by a load of animals offered in sacrifice? Surely, said the prophets of the Old Testament, the only Bridge, which is secure, is that of human beings doing the justice and making the peace, which God requires. So, when Christ comes into the world, he says: 'Sacrifice and offering thou hast not desired but a body hast thou prepared for me. Lo I come to do thy will O God.' (Hebrews 10. 5-7) So, as St John puts it (John 1.51), Jesus makes of his body the ladder, which connects heaven and earth. He is our one and only High Priest who makes the one and only sacrifice which is his life lived and given away in love. The

heart of religion now is not a sanctuary with clerics pottering around performing rituals, it is a bloody gallows to which a man is nailed. This revolution in Priesthood has to be our starting point. It means that the whole world of clericalism with its deadly deference is blown apart.

Way back in 1960, a German professor from Bonn, one Joseph Ratzinger, drew our attention to that 23rd chapter of St Matthew's gospel (Joseph Ratzinger 'Christian Brotherhood' Sheed and Ward.) That is the one which contains our Lord's most ferocious attack on clericalism and priestly self-importance. 'You are not to be called teachers', says Jesus 'for you have one teacher and you are all brethren.' The one Teacher, the one Master is the Bridge to the one Father in heaven.

But this one High Priest, Jesus, calls his brothers and sisters to be part of this bridge-building enterprise. We are, says St Peter, to be a 'royal priesthood', ourselves a temple into which we are all built as stones, so that, with Jesus, we may offer our lives in love(1 Peter 2.) so that God's justice and God's peace may rule in our world. That is our Priesthood, and the springboard for it, is this celebration of the Mass in which we enter into and share in the one offering of Jesus. But, as St Paul reminds us,(1 Corinthians 12.) this priestly body has many limbs, is served by diverse gifts. Here we do not try to do everything ourselves for this is an 'ordered' body in which we delight to do things for one another. As that same German professor pointed out 'The sixth sacrament of the catholic Church is not the sacrament of priesthood but of 'order'. It is the whole 'ordering ' of the church, which is to be a sign of Jesus the great High Priest. So our first reading today (Acts 6) is about the establishment of what became the order of deacons.

Of course this 'ordering' includes those we now know as 'priests'. But it is important that these priests are not stuffed back into that old religious framework as if the revolution of

Jesus had not taken place. Because the New Testament writers recognised this danger, they avoided using the word ‘priest’ for those we now call ‘priests’. They were content with the word ‘presbyter’, ‘elder’, the local leader of the Christian community who, as such, naturally presided at the Mass. They had their part to play but so did the rest of the community. It was still the offering we all make. These presbyters were seen rather like conductors of an orchestra. A lone conductor without an orchestra waving his baton would simply look silly. He or she is there, not to replace the orchestra but to enable this variety of musicians to make music.

So we have asked God for what we want – more priests. When our prayers do not seem to be answered, what shall we do? Perhaps remember that ‘Thy will be done’ and take seriously this silence of God. Maybe God is saying something in that silence. Perhaps ‘No more priests until you wake up and see what I really want to give you – pastors of the flock, servants of the servants of God. And’ God continues ‘ you may well be surprised whom I am calling. Are you prepared for such surprises?’ Just recently the catholic bishop in Queensland, Australia, has been forced from office – sacked. Why? For some great scandal? In a pastoral letter, the bishop called for open debate about the ordination of women and allowing married priests. Maybe the scandal is of church authorities showing that they are not ready for such divine surprises.

Peter Cornwell May 22 2011.