

First Mass of Fr Steve Hilton
11th October 2020 - Manchester Cathedral

What a pleasure and privilege to be preaching here and on this occasion. Fr Steve like so many of this year's cohort of priestly ordinands must have kept asking himself if this day was ever going to arrive! But here he is and (Thank God) here we are; here to celebrate with him and to hold him in our prayers in this sacred moment and in this sacred space within the octave of one of its patrons, St Denys. So perhaps after all there is something of timeliness herein.

I'm sure you all know that after being beheaded on Montmartre in Paris, Denys, the 3rd Century city's first bishop, walked to where the Basilica of Saint Denys now stands carrying his severed head and preaching the whole way. Well, I often think I have the tendency to lose my head in the pulpit but I also own to being rather sedentary, so the idea of carrying your head whilst preaching and traveling 7.6 kilometers by foot sounds to me a bit like being able to walk and chew gum without falling over. I'm not sure I can do that either - but here I am anyway. My thanks to you, Mr Dean, and to you, Fr Steve, for this kind invitation.

The celebration of the Eucharist is always a sacred moment. But we can lose sight of this. We may take it for granted, we may have constructed our own preferred comfortable version from a range of liturgical choices, we may think it's not much more than a symbol of togetherness. But even if this be the case, the sacrament of Holy Communion has an intrinsic and indelible value which rises above our limitations and lack of comprehension, whatever they may be. The taking of bread, of blessing and breaking it, of giving a cup of wine which has likewise been hallowed, is to acknowledge that simple but profound statement of Jesus, that where two or three are gathered together in his name he will be also. The sharing of Christ's body and blood gives life to the recipients, connects us to the Holy Spirit in the most direct way possible, and makes us God bearers in our own persons, even if only fleetingly. This church I once read was the only one in the Church of England to have maintained a weekly celebration of the Eucharist from the reforms of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I to 1760; a lifetime later the Oxford Movement would revive this precious heritage across a much broader canvas. But if this fact be true, this place should hold a very special position in the history of our whole church. What is personally momentary is made a matter of permanence through the commitment of the whole church.

To be called to be a priest in the Church of God is amongst other things to rise to the immense challenge of presiding at the Lord's table where these mysteries are manifested. To be a priest is also to work so that this celebration is more than a knee jerk of piety, or an expression of complacent faith: what it

has to be is the source of our own engagement with the power of the gospel and with God's enduring, overflowingly generous grace, encountered initially at our baptism. A celebrant priest is called to breath the Spirit into this sacred moment and space: the priest does this so that all of our peculiarities, failures and problems are given new focus for good, like the rattling movement of so many scattered bones being transformed into full skeletal form and then dressed in the sinews and flesh of God's Holy People.

Priests do and should bring who they are to the altar. Every personality type is to welcomed here, if God's calling has been identified and confirmed properly. (Aside) But priests are also called to stand neutrally as Christ's representatives for his people - how do they do this? In a number of ways.

Priests must be ready to correct errors expressed as kindly and positively as possible : we're not drunk, its not even 9 o'clock in the morning - (Oh, wait a minute, I think the sun has probably just dipped below the yard arm). Priests must deliver challenges calmly but with integrity and encouragement - God turns things upside down - instead of prophesying the old will dream inspiring dreams; instead of dreaming the young will prophesy with wisdom. Priests must be strong and supportive to their flock, and live lives of peace - even in the face of the sun being turned to darkness and moon to blood, in the terrible days of a chaotic viral infection, amidst the violence of war.

Jesus calls his ministers telling them that because he lives they will also live. This is, in St John's understanding and language, the root of what makes 'us' different from 'the world'. The fact that it is St Jude who prompts this explanation from Our Lord perhaps comes as no surprise: it might seem like a lost cause to limber up to opposition of what has such obvious and frightening power around us. But with Jesus' life and Spirit to go ahead and give support behind why should we falter? We have food for this journey here at this table, and it is for the priest to manifest this for all of us in Jesus' name.

As a boy when my dad was working at the Town Hall I used sometimes to come here for choral evensong, and I was a very regular visitor to St Denys' bookshop run by Penny Glover at the time. This place and its traditions contributed to what would become my own sense of being a priest. I'm so glad for you Fr Steve that this wonderful church and city have opened for you, Marco and your friends and family, so many opportunities for life, love and happiness. May you in your priestly ministry and at this altar share those gifts with those you are called to serve.
Amen.