

Christ's love urges us on

First of all might I say what a privilege it is for me to be standing here on the occasion of your ordination as priests and I would like to thank Archbishop Michael for the invitation to preach on this occasion. It will be a day to remember as you are joined by your family and friends, the people you have served among and those you will serve as well as your sisters and brothers among the clergy.

You are embarking on ministry in a rapidly evolving Church. Many of the things we would have taken for granted when I was ordained are no longer the same. The church is not given the same uncritical ear – and maybe that is no bad thing. But the ordination service, and the promises of ordination provide us with a framework that I think has stood the test of time.

At the start of the service Archbishop Michael asked you

‘Do you believe in your heart that God has called you to the office and work of a priest in his Church?’

And you replied ‘I believe that God has called me.’

This isn't something you realised today – this conviction has been part of your life, something you have wrestled with, maybe something you have sought to avoid. Can you look back to the time this gripped you and you felt you had to share it, you had to have this call tested by the wider Church? It is not something that seemed to strike you as a good idea. It is not something that

you thought, ‘Sure we’ll give it a go.’ Those of us in ministry – and we are a strange and varied bunch – will all talk of a feeling of compulsion.

So you can no doubt identify with Paul’s words to the Church at Corinth, that we heard earlier; ‘Christ’s love urges us on’ or ‘compels us’ as another translation puts it. The word that Paul has used here urges that we have translated as ‘compel’ has connotations of coercion, of seizing hold of you, of laying siege.

So, Ross and Rebecca, here you are. You have survived selection; you have survived your training. In that you have had the love and support of your families all along this process. You survived your internships and, yes, even your dissertation. In a short while, you will be asked to take your ordination vows that I always see as putting a shape on our ministry.

Rebecca, Ross you offer to God your own distinct gifts. There are things you are very good at and there are things you will not be so good at. That is how God has made you and this is what you offer to God in service

Earlier in the summer, my wife and I were in Taize. Quite by chance, before our own programme began, we found ourselves in a workshop being lead by Jean Vanier, the founder of the L’Arche community. He used an expression which resonated with me and I’ve found myself reflecting on it since.

God creates with what he puts in our hands.

Originally used in the context of the Eucharist, I think it has a great deal to say about vocation, your vocation, your ministry – the gifts God has placed in your hands, the gifts you offer back to God.

In the years to come, you will be asked to do many things in addition to your leading of worship and your pastoral work, in the course of your ministry – chairing meetings of Vestry, of Boards of management along with washing up, locking up, setting up tables, putting away tables, cutting grass, weeding paths. It is right that we should share the load of these ordinary tasks with members of our Parishes. But we must never lose sight of why we are here. And so Archbishop Michael will ask you:

Do you believe and accept the Holy Scriptures as revealing all things necessary for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ?

Answer **I do.**

Do you believe and accept the doctrine of the Christian faith as the Church of Ireland has received it?

Answer **I do.**

In your ministry will you expound the Scriptures and teach that doctrine?

Answer **By the help of God, I will.**

Our ministry, our whole ministry, must be built on the bed rock of our commitment to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. That must come through in our ministry of teaching, our pastoral work and yes even in the stacking of chairs, the clearing of weeds. We live in a world of hierarchies and even in the life of the Church it is easy to slip into the mindset of hierarchies.

In Luke's Gospel, we read of Jesus reminding his disciples

"The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. ²⁶ But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. ²⁷ But I am among you as one who serves.
Luke 22:25-27

An integral part of ministry is service, your pastoral ministry in which you sit alongside people in their joys and sorrows, in which you listen and pray with them and for them. Your pastoral ministry and your ministry of word and sacrament are not separate – they are two sides of the same coin. Your pastoral ministry will enrich your teaching ministry and your teaching ministry will enrich your pastoral ministry.

After the taking of the vows, after the laying on of hands in ordination, Archbishop Michael, as he prepares to lead us in prayer for Rebecca and Ross, will remind us all:

Because none of us can bear the weight of this ministry in our own strength, but only by the grace and power of God,

‘Only by the grace and power of God.....’ How often, in the busy-ness, do we so often lose sight of that. Let me offer you two pictures – one general, one rather more personal – as we try to reflect on that. Have you ever found yourself on a car journey; the petrol tank is running low, edging towards the empty mark? ‘Sure, we’ll make it home – we’ll get petrol tomorrow.’ Then the orange light goes on, first flashing then constant – we realise we are running on empty.

The other one as I say is more personal. I recall when I was in Mountmellick, around 30 years ago. I was at a diocesan conference and Bishop Walton

Empey came across to me with his characteristically cheery, ‘Kevin, how are things in Mountmellick?’ For some reason I did not give the natural reply of the clergy when asked such questions by their bishop – ‘Wonderful, Bishop.’ Instead I said I wasn’t looking for a move but I was feeling rather flat. He looked me straight in the eye and said, ‘Kevin, the prayer life has gone, hasn’t it?’ He’d hit the nail on the head. I realised I was running on empty.

He packed me off to Glenstall for a few days. It was just what I needed. I learned the wisdom of the words Pope John Paul 2nd said to students in Maynooth when he was in Ireland. ‘We can be so busy in the work of the Lord that we forget the Lord of the work.’ I wish I could say that that was the last time I found myself running on empty – but at least I now know what I have to do.

So Ross, Rebecca, the Archbishop will ask you:

Will you be diligent in prayer, in reading holy Scripture, and in all studies that will deepen your faith and fit you to uphold the truth of the Gospel?

Answer **By the help of God, I will.**

Will you then, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, continually stir up the gift of God that is in you, to make Christ known to all people?

Answer **By the help of God, I will.**

For we can indeed be so busy in the work of the Lord, that we forget the Lord of the work. Time is precious; there are so many calls on our time, meetings to attend, jobs to do, people to see – all of these are important in their own right – but so also is this time we give to study, to prayer, to reflection. We short-change ourselves, we actually short-change the people we are called to serve if

we lose sight of this part of our ministry. For as the Archbishop will remind us as he leads us in prayer:

Because none of us can bear the weight of this ministry in our own strength, but only by the grace and power of God

In a few minutes you will take your vows of ordination. You come responding to God's call on your life, that sense of compulsion, almost coercion we were thinking about earlier. You bring your strengths and your weaknesses – God has a way of working through both. May God bless you in your ministry of word, of sacrament, of prayer, of service among the people of the Christ Church Group, of Greystones – and wherever else God leads you in the years to come. In your quiet times with the Lord, may you know his presence, his refreshment and his peace. May God bless you and your families – never take your families for granted.

I will finish with those words of Jean Vanier – ‘God creates with what he has put in our hands’ May the Church be richly blessed through the gifts that God has placed in your hands that you offer back to him today.