

**Homily by The Most Reverend Kevin McDonald, Archbishop of Southwark,
at the Ordination to the Priesthood
of The Reverend Timothy Byron, S.J. and The Reverend Roger Dawson, S.J.
7th July 2007**

The ordination of a priest is, from many points of view, a very special and a very moving occasion. For one thing, ordinations happen less often than they once did but there always was and always will be a certain sense of awe and wonder both at the action of God through the hands of the bishop and at the self-giving of the ordinands to God's action, at their receptivity to the grace of this sacrament with all that it will bestow and all that it will cost. Of course, our two ordinands today are members of the Society of Jesus and will exercise their ministry as members of that Society, so for me this occasion is rather different from ordaining priests for my own diocese but that thought presses me to try to discern and articulate what is the essence of priesthood, the essence of any ordination to the ministerial priesthood and I look to the readings that have been chosen for this Mass to shed light on that. They tell us priests something about what we are, who we are and what we do.

A priest is, in a particular kind of way, a bearer of something. Something is entrusted to him and there are many and various ways in which he honours that trust and offers to people the gift of which he is the bearer. It *is* a gift and not something that he has manufactured. It is grace and a grace of which people stand in need. The prophecy of Isaiah says:

"Oh come to the water, all you who are thirsty;
though you have no money, come!
Buy corn without money, and eat,
and, at no cost, wine and milk." (Isaiah 55:1)

A priest will celebrate the sacraments; most particularly he will celebrate the Eucharist. He will preach the Word of God and teach the Catholic Faith; and all of this is gift, a gift he receives and of which he is the steward. The *living out* of priestly ministry will take many forms. But, in whatever form it is expressed and exercised, the priest provides what is really needed and what he can offer uniquely in virtue of his ordination. This is crucially the case with the celebration of the Eucharist, which lies at the heart of the life and mission of a priest and is symbolic and emblematic of his identity and his role as a priest. Bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ who died for all humanity and from whose side flowed blood and water for the healing of the nations, for the reconciliation of all people. It is freely given, and of this the priest is the bearer and his whole life and whole way of being should and must be shaped by that truth.

This also applies in a particular way to that aspect of priestly ministry which we call the ministry of the Word. I don't just mean preaching but also teaching, spiritual direction, communications, care for people, chaplaincy work in which our two ordinands will be engaged. We have our personal opinions, our views, our ideas, but whatever task has been assigned to us, we are always bearers of the Word of God, and so the study of the Word of God, *lectio divina*, must continue to be what forms our minds and shapes our thinking. *That is what we have to give.* The Word of God is what is free, priceless and for all and it has been entrusted to us to ponder, to explore and to make accessible to those to whom we minister and for whom we work.

This way of understanding our lives is rightly called vocation, and is richly explained and illustrated in the gospel we have heard. The very last sentence says: "Then, bringing their boats back to land, they left everything and followed him." Priesthood will involve letting go of what is familiar, of what we're used to, and being ready to engage with what is new and may well be unchosen. This, I think, is what makes vocation difficult for many people today to understand. The vocabulary of rights and choice controls the way in which people *like* to think about their future and their lives. Our society and our politics have propagated this for several decades. But going where you are sent, living with those to whom you are sent, and doing the work that you are called to do, remains part of the priestly vocation and is a way of life that both requires and fosters a particular quality of freedom.

In the gospel, Simon Peter protests to Jesus: "Leave me, Lord, I am a sinful man." But the Lord already knew that and our potential for the work entrusted to us may well be bound up precisely with our personal struggles and conflicts. That's the way it works. And finally, a key thing about priesthood, namely that in whatever context it is exercised it is for and about *people* – the many. The apostles are told to put out into the deep - "*duc in altum*" - and when they do, they net a huge number of fish. A priest, in one way or another, will meet or will influence very many people and it is them and their need for living water that must control, shape and motivate our lives: to recognise Jesus as Lord, to love him, to follow him, to receive his spirit and hear his word and to be bearers of both in the service of his people. It is to this that Tim and Roger are called today. May God who has begun the good work in them bring it to fulfilment.