

Rite of Election

St George's Cathedral, Southwark 12th February 2005 Homily by Archbishop Kevin McDonald

The word "election" in usual language, and particularly at the moment, makes us think about politics; about our hopes and fears for the people of Iraq; about the future of our country and the constant bickering between politicians; about the democratic process – choosing leaders. Choosing people to govern us; choosing on the basis of a calculation as to what is in our best interests. "Choice" is very much a word for our times. "The right to choose" is a phrase we often hear. It's a phrase that makes me uneasy. Choice tends to be the prerogative of the rich. The poor don't have much in the way of choice. And choice tends to be about *me*, about what is in my interests, what is to my advantage.

"Election", *today*, means something different. It means being called and chosen. It means recognising the call, responding to it, acknowledging who it is that calls us and, in doing that, consenting freely and joyfully to the call that has come to us through the Church. The call and the election is ultimately a call from God but it is mediated through the Church, and we respond to this call by coming into full communion with the Church.

So, election is not a private matter between myself and God. God did not reveal himself privately. He revealed himself publicly, in his Son, Jesus Christ. And the Church is the Body of Christ: the living presence of Christ in the world. Belonging to Christ and belonging to the Church are inextricably linked. As Catholics, when we evangelise, when we preach the Gospel of Christ, we don't simply invite people to enter into a personal relationship with Christ (though we *do* do that – and it is fundamental). We invite them to be a member of Christ's Body, to *gather*, to offer sacrifice, to enter into communion with all those who share the same faith, the same sacramental order, the same Church order. Christianity isn't a private religion. It has its private aspects: our personal prayer is private, intimate and very precious; our confession of our sins is private but it is also public, and that public dimension finds its fullest expression in the celebration of the Eucharist.

This year has been designated by the Pope as a "Year of the Eucharist", inviting us to reflect and focus on this central mystery of our faith. It's in this year that you have been called to the Eucharist and have responded. And today your response is public. Your name is read out. You stand up and are counted. You recognised God's call and you respond within the Church.

In your own parishes you are supported by your local community, by your sponsors, by your family, by your priests and deacons, by all who have shared your journey of faith. And so it is in the parish that you will take your place as a Catholic, as someone in full communion with the Catholic Church. And I must say that, the longer I am here in Southwark, the more I am

impressed and gratified by the vitality and the vibrancy of the life of our parishes. That's the good news and even if newspapers are more interested in our bad news we know that we have good news and you who are candidates and catechumens today are part of that good news. Thank you for your faith, your courage, your witness.

But, coming to the Cathedral today also expresses your wider belonging to the diocese, to the local Church of Southwark, a large diocese covering the whole of South London and the county of Kent.

Wherever Mass is celebrated in your parish you pray for me, and for my assistant bishops, and you pray for Pope John Paul. He has been especially in our prayers these last weeks. The mention of the Pope and the Bishop expresses the community, the public dimension of being a Catholic. As I said a moment ago, it expresses our sharing in one faith, one sacramental system, one Church order, that is worldwide and the number of Catholics increases each year especially in Africa and South America. A great people. A people on the move.

You came here today for a key moment in your journey of faith. I recognise you and I warmly welcome you. But the journey continues. Christian life is a pilgrimage. Like the journey of the people of Israel through the desert, it is also a testing time and our faith will be tried. But it is a journey with a goal. Election is a call – a call to everlasting life, a call beyond death to eternal life. The journey through this life that we make in the Church is our opportunity to continue and to deepen our free response to God's will. To enter ever more deeply into love of God and love of others; to fulfil the unique vocation that each of us has. We're "elected". But we're not purely passive. We respond in freedom every day to the call to love God and to love and serve our fellow men and women in whatever vocation we have been given with God's plan. This is beautifully expressed in today's first reading:

"The Lord will guide you,
giving you relief in desert places.
He will give strength to your bones
and you shall be like a watered garden
like a spring of water
whose waters never run dry."

The neophytes Mass that we will celebrate after Easter is important as a coming together to celebrate our coming into full communion with the Catholic Church in the diocese of Southwark, and to express solidarity in our journey of faith together. May God continue to bless you and strengthen you.