

# Ordination to the Priesthood of Neil Vincent

Homily by Archbishop Kevin McDonald

---

In the remarkable homily given by Pope Benedict at his Mass of inauguration, he said the following words:

“One of the basic characteristics of a shepherd must be to love the people entrusted to him, even as he loves Christ whom he serves. ‘Feed my sheep’ says Christ to Peter, and now, at this moment, he says it to me as well. Feeding means loving, and loving also means being ready to suffer. Loving means giving the sheep what is truly good, the nourishment of God’s truth, of God’s word, the nourishment of his presence, which he gives us in the Blessed Sacrament. My dear friends – at this moment I can only say: pray for me that I may learn to love the Lord more and more. Pray for me that I may learn to love his flock more and more.”

These words were spoken by the new Pope just after he had received the pallium and the fisherman’s ring: the two great symbols of his office. But they are words that resonate with me and which I am sure will resonate with every priest and deacon here today and most particularly they must resonate for Neil on this day of his Ordination to the Priesthood. A priest is someone who is configured to Christ our High Priest, the Good Shepherd. And being so configured he is essentially and necessarily someone whose life and very being will be characterised by love of Christ and love of his people. If a priest does not love Christ and if he does not love his people then his life has no meaning and no joy. The happiness of priesthood lies in recognising that we are called personally by Christ and it means recognising that the people for whom we have pastoral responsibility have been entrusted to us by Jesus Christ. There is a phrase in the ordination service of the Book of Common Prayer which expresses most profoundly the basis and motive of our love for our people:

“Have always therefore printed in your remembrance, how great a treasure is committed to your charge. For they are the sheep of Christ, which he bought with his death, and for whom he shed his blood.”

The heart of the priesthood lies in the inextricable connection between love of Christ and love of our people. They cannot be separated and the readings chosen for this Mass explore that fundamental truth in different ways.

The prophet Isaiah says: “The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the poor.” The Holy Spirit will come upon you, Neil, in the laying on of hands, and your own hands will be anointed with oil. But this is not a private matter: it is a public and an ecclesial event. It is an important

day for the Church, an important day for the people to whom you will minister and without them this ceremony has no meaning. For that reason, the presence of you, the people of the diocese, is vital and integral to the celebration of the Sacrament of Ordination. Every priest, including those who for much of their lives are not *directly* engaged in pastoral ministry is in some way or other at the service of people. Pastoral ministry, the cure of souls, is the natural habitat of the priest. In his relationship with his people he discovers afresh each day the meaning and purpose of his priesthood. He finds it both in the joys and in the sorrows and difficulties of his priestly life. The joy and the suffering are also inextricably connected and provide the inward energy for his ministry and out of them the priest gives life to his people by his words, by his deeds, and very specifically by the celebration of the Sacraments – most especially, the Eucharist, which lies at the heart of the life of a priest and *is* the heart of the life of the Church. The people of God gather to offer sacrifice, to hear the Word of God, to feed on the body and blood of the Lord, and it is the priest who gathers, presides and celebrates.

The dynamic of priestly life is further explored in the second letter to the Corinthians, which we have also heard today. God has reconciled us in Christ and given us the task of handing on this reconciliation. Those words suggest many things, but not least they recall the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which is a wonderful, constant and recurring opportunity that we have to lay hold of the fullness of life that Christ offers. We tend to be afraid of the fullness of life in Christ, afraid of what it might cost, of where it might lead us, and Pope Benedict addressed that fear in his homily. He said: “If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful, and great.” The priest provides the Sacrament of Reconciliation for his people, and for the priest himself the quest for ever deeper reconciliation with God inevitably brings a deepening of the grace and power of priesthood.

It is in and through our own growing reconciliation with God that we are able to be bearers of reconciliation to others. The priest must love his people and seek to secure their reconciliation with Christ who died for them. As I have said, there are many levels, many dimensions to the reconciliation brought by Christ: as well as individual reconciliation, and inextricably connected with that, is work for reconciliation among all Christians, among all the baptised: the reconciliation with the Jewish people and peace between all religions and all people of good will. And to this we may add the healing of the terrible divisions between rich and

poor and the conflicts that bear the bitter fruit of terrorism and war. A priest is for all people and in relation to everyone his ministry at one level or another is a ministry of reconciliation. This was manifestly the case in the ministry of Pope John Paul II and it was recognised in other Churches, other religions and people of no religion. And so it is for every priest. So it will be for you, Neil.

It is an awesome task but the task is one for which we have been chosen. As Christ says in today's Gospel: "Remain in my love. You did not choose me. No, I chose you, to go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last." Therein lies our strength and our confidence.

The good that a priest does, often quite unconsciously, by his life, his work, his witness, can never be quantified. The joy of the priesthood lies in recognising that, unworthy though we are, our lives bear great fruit and the Catholic people recognise that and have great love and appreciation for their priests. That love and support of our people provides a source of great strength and confidence. The other source is our personal and intimate relationship with Christ who has loved us and called us. It is a relationship that must be fostered and nurtured throughout our lives. We pray today that Neil's priesthood will bring him great joy and we warmly welcome you, Neil, into the Southwark presbyterate, confident in your happiness and in the great harvest that will be the fruit of your labours.