

a sermon preached on the occasion of the

First Mass

of

James Edward McKenna

6pm Tuesday 11 December 2007

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore
parish priest

Lections: Acts 2:1-21; John 14:15-17

Jim, on this occasion of your first presiding at the church's most sacred and central of rites, the eucharist, I could give you a whole heap of advice – then again, you may feel I've already done quite enough of that! Or I could tell you what I think a priest is meant to do – but you already know that I resist the reduction of the office of priest to a list of tasks and duties. You may be relieved to hear this – then again, you know me well enough to suspect that I have might have something more demanding in mind!

I well remember our first meeting. We were in the carpark at St Barnabas Fendalton, after an Archdeaconry clergy meeting, and you knew that I was being considered for St Luke's. You told me, in no uncertain terms, about your role as deacon. When I drove away I was left in no doubt – you were a deacon! And there were many occasions after that first encounter when you repeated your case, emphatically! Indeed, I think it fair to describe you as having been a 'militant deacon' – and I suspect others may agree.

So what happened? Well you remind me of St Paul – and you can take that any way you like! St Paul, scholars agree, was a militant Pharisee, and we all know what he had in mind for Damascus. St Luke's account of St Paul's falling off his horse is often presented as the quintessential conversion story, and there is truth here. Indeed, his conversion may be more normative than we have allowed, so reductive and literalistic are we about the detail. What I have in mind that makes him normative is this – militant attitudes always fall off horses, and a good many of us are militant about something. As you and I have so often discussed these last five years, those strident, shouting, aggressive voices in our church who go on and on about sexuality are militants whose crash to the ground is just a matter of time. Of course, what we all share, and which breaks down any divide between 'us' and 'them' and leaves only a universal human 'us', is that we ourselves must also fall off our horses, our peculiar militancy is bound to meet the risen Christ on some road somewhere. Conversion is an eruption that pulls us up short in the middle of the road we have planned for ourselves.

So it seems to me that the militant deacon has been knocked off his high horse. The call to priesthood which you began to wrestle with more than two years ago was an eruption of something you did not expect, and which totally overturned your militant diaconate. And thus knocked off your horse you did the only thing that any sensible militant can do when the campaign is thwarted – regroup. I have had the privilege of being close to you while you have, like Paul, stumbled around without sight, reliant upon the leading and guidance of others – even when you weren't all that keen on the guidance. This state of outer blindness, which so frustrates many who present themselves to be ordained, is the essential condition – as Paul's story shows – for focussing our attention on the inner experience. Only by a time of complete disorientation, when our militancy is helpless and useless, is it possible to hear the voice of the risen Christ who is within us. This is such a counter-cultural and 'un-businesslike' method that many become very angry with what is called 'the process'. You know what I mean, for you too had your time of anger with 'the process'. But as I think you know, this disorientation is the essential school for attentiveness. So attend you did, and endure the disorientation you did, thanks be to God.

But there's another side to all this. How could the early church be sure that whatever it was that Paul the militant Pharisee thought he heard and saw was authentic? Luke makes it perfectly

clear that Paul's conversion is attested by the church, that is, by believers who speak on behalf of the community. And this is the most difficult aspect of the testing of vocations for many people – no individual decides on their own vocation. The individual has a profound experience, yes. But the community has the responsibility to discern what that experience is in relation to others. It's not a case of doubting an individual's experience. Rather, it's a case of the community being responsible for discerning what any given individual's experience might mean for the community. For the church is the keeper of the dogmas and the symbols, which means that the church must always listen to the experience of individuals. And conversely individuals must always seek to understand the meaning of their experiences in light of the wisdom of the symbols of the tradition. And that means that the individual who perceives a call must be willing to live with an appalling tension, the creative and dynamic space which opens up between the individual's experience and the symbols of the tradition.

The priest is called to stand in that place, in that tension between the symbols of the tradition and their own experience, and to wait on that tension, no matter how unbearable or painful or alienating - until something new and truly authentic emerges. And this new and emergent reality is not the work of any individual, nor for that matter of the church, but of the risen Christ in our midst - the Advocate, the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit through whose power we abide in Christ as Christ abides in God. "You know the Spirit, because the Spirit abides with you, and will be in you." ¹ Indeed, the capacity to remain in that place of tension between the symbols of the tradition and the authenticity of our own experiences is the gift of that Holy Spirit. And you, Jim, having been knocked off your militant diaconate horse, and having been led, disoriented and powerless, by others, are one whom God has called to fearlessly, courageously and hopefully remain in that place of tension. And it has been my immense privilege, an honour beyond words, to have witnessed your resolve to do exactly that.

And the reason why it matters so much that you are willing to stand in that place is not because you or I, or any other ordained priest, is particularly special. Indeed, most of us are a pretty un-special lot, if we're honest. No, the reason why it matters so much is that this is where *all of us* who are baptised are called to stand. This is the common christian vocation – to attend seriously to our own inner experience, to be willing to give that task the time and space and fortitude that it requires, and to hold that experience in dynamic tension with the church symbols and dogmas, until the tension bears the fruit of an entirely new position, a new insight, a new direction, a new creation. As priest, it is your responsibility and privilege to help others stand in that place of creative and dynamic tension – and you and I can only do that insofar as we're willing to do so ourselves.

And the place, the physical location, the symbolic point at which we enact Christ's command, at which that tension is most acute, and most transformative, is the eucharist. At the altar the tradition's supreme symbols, Christ's Body and Blood, are held in dynamic tension with our individual experiences – or we could say that at the altar our real and authentic experience, including our militancy, is reinterpreted through the Eucharistic symbols. That is why eucharist is the source and summit of christian life. And that is why your first mass matters so much – because in this mass, this first of many, you publicly consent to that pattern of life which will be the turning point of everything that you might do as a priest in the church of God.

So I say "Thanks be to God", who has knocked you off your high horse – for your willing cooperation with that which invites you to live in the tension, for the church which has discerned your call and who has empowered you by the Holy Spirit, and for the common calling we all share – to stand in the transformative Eucharistic place, waiting and holding, until we are able to receive the fullness of the Spirit of truth, who always leads us where we do not choose, and abide in Christ as Christ abides in God.

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¹ John 14:17