

Today represents a significant gathering of family members, friends, parishioners and former parishioners, work colleagues, members of the Diocesan family and a few tourists who got caught up in the crowd. I imagine that in the main just about all of you are warmly disposed to support the person or persons you're here to witness being priested.

I'd be surprised, however, if it has always been that way for at least some of you.

When I met with my parents and told them I was quitting teaching and entering theological college and that I was applying for ordination, my father reacted by saying 'so, you're going to be a sponger for the rest of your life!' I was the first member of the family to go to university and the reaction was somewhat understandable even if a little discouraging.

When it became public that I was going to become a priest at the school I taught at in country New South Wales I had a succession of puzzled boys come up to me and ask 'Does that mean you can't get married?' It wasn't hard to see what they were concerned about!

At the same time I'm sure all of us who gather here today will be conscious of the enormity of the challenge that confronts each of the candidates as they enter the priesthood. At the very least, given the reputational damage the church has suffered in recent years, I'm sure some of you are thinking that it is remarkable that anyone who want to become a priest. The fact that there are 23 of you is really quite amazing. The reality is that each of these candidates are here because of a deep inner conviction that this is what God would have them do, which has been confirmed by the leaders of God's church. They come from a whole range of backgrounds, which reflects the rich diversity of the wider community and increasingly the Anglican Church.

As we gather here today it is also in the context of knowing that the task that lies before each of these people is huge. It used to be that when people were ordained they would be working in what could be described as a settled church. Parish churches that were sustainable and with established ministries. We live in a new Mission era and change is needed. Our city is growing rapidly and we need new pioneer ministries not only on the suburban fringe but also in the more intense inner urban areas. A number today work in schools as Chaplains and they have significant ministries in Anglican schools. Many churches are seeking to refocus their energies and to discover new ways to connect and witness in our highly secular age.

Some here today have a few inklings of what a more outward looking church might look like. None of us have got all the answers. This new group of priests will hopefully be part of the process of us finding new ways of being God's people in our Australian and Melbourne/Geelong context.

All of which brings us to Paul's wonderful words in 2 Corinthians 4.1-7. The apostle gives us a powerful and yet realistic perspective on the role of being a priest, which this fine group are about to enter into.

1. Ministry is Given by God

'Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.' 2 Corinthians 4.1

Paul was **confident in the ministry** that he had because he knew that it wasn't something he had **claimed for himself** – it was a ministry **given to him by God**.

As an evangelist to the Gentiles – Paul recognised that it was **due to God's mercy** that he had this ministry. He himself had been radically turned around by the mercy of God and God had **directly given him this critical role**.

Ministry is **a gift from God** – it is something that he gives to us **for the sake of others**, for **their mercy's sake**. **Through our ministry**, which God gives us, others can come to **know the riches of the mercy of God**.

- they can know his **forgiveness and grace**
- they can know his **presence and wisdom**
- they have a sure **hope for the future**
- they are members of **God's cross-generational and multi ethnic community**

Ministry is a gift from God, given to us for the sake of others. We don't take it upon ourselves; rather it is given to us in trust.

He chooses to work through us for the sake of those he gives us.

As Paul says we don't lose heart because it's **by God's mercy that we've got to this point** and it will be by **God's mercy** that we will be able **to do the work that God has given us to do**.

2. Ministry is Proclaimed by People

'Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God.' 2 Corinthians 4.2

Ministry is given by God, but **proclaimed by people**. Because it is God's Gospel we proclaim

- we **aren't secretive about it**
- we **don't use manipulative techniques**
- we **don't offer things we can't fulfil**

- we **don't distort the word of God** by making it more comfortable for the sake of our hearers.

No – we set forth the '**truth plainly**' (v.2)
- we preach Jesus Christ as Lord (v.5)

God has revealed the truth **of the Gospel in the Scriptures** –
It is an enormous privilege and God's very high calling for all priests to be set aside

to **proclaim that truth**
not to **distort it**
not to **dilute** that
not to **add** to it

We need to make it as **clear as possible** so people can hear and respond to Christ.

3. **Ministry is Light Shining Into Darkness**

2 Corinthians 4.6

'For God, who said, "let light shine out of darkness", made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.'

Fruit in Gospel ministry is dependent on God.

It is **light shining into the darkness**.

In verse 4 Paul says

'The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel.'

People are **blinded to the truth of Christ**; it is as if they are wearing a blindfold.

They can't see Christ
They think life is normal without him
They live for the here and now

Someone said recently:

'Secularism has marginalised Christian faith and relativism declared it to be irrelevant.'

We live in a society where God may as well not exist and where you can believe what you want to believe. Our task is difficult, but we must

- **pray** that God would be merciful
- graciously **tell people about Jesus**
- **urge them to respond**
- **pray that God would speak** and lift the veil so that they may truly see

Gospel ministry is proclaimed by people like you and me – but ultimately **we're totally dependent on God to act** – it is God's work - 'light shining into darkness'.

There is **great freedom in this** – we do our part, we labour and sweat – but then we leave the results to God. It is his work to change people's hearts and lives.

4. Ministry is Treasure in Jars of Clay

2 Corinthians 4.7

'But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us.'

The amazing thing is that **this treasure** – Gospel ministry – has been given to **people like Colleen, Paul, Angela, Sam, Michael, Dennis, Sheridan, Mark, Cun Sheng, Chester, Amanda, Manoli, Bree, Christiaan, Elizabeth, Conrad, John, Natalie, Matthew, Ben, Anthony, Wendy, Duku** and each of us as God's people.

- we're described as jars of clay

- clay vessels can **so easily be flawed** and **cracked – they break easily**

Each of our new priests has **great strengths** - experience, passion, preaching, personality, and pastoral leadership but at the **heart of my life** and theirs, there are **paradoxes and flaws**

We're are fragile

We're are flawed

We will fail

We are prone to certain vulnerabilities.

Paul says here we **shouldn't be surprised by this** –

God has entrusted the Gospel to weak, flawed people.

Why? – *'to show that all the surpassing power is from God and not from us.'*
V.7

The **irony is this**.

It is **when we are weakest** that God can be **strongest**.

It is in our **areas of vulnerability** that God can overcome and really use us.

This also, is a great encouragement, I hope, for each of you who are being ordained and those who will journey together with you – as spouse, son/daughter, parent, brother/sister, parishioner, colleague, and friend.

You're fragile, so are they!

You at times will feel up against it, so will they!

You're aware of the problems and issues, so are they!

But God works in and through us in our weakness.

If I'm right in suggesting that at present the church is seeking to renew and reinvent itself then I hope each of you will want to be visionary and passionate gospel leaders.

- Teaching/preaching the Gospel of God's love and God's word written

- Shaping a vision with God's people in your context
- Team leaders and team players
- Exhorting and equipping all of God's people to use their God given gifts and abilities to serve and witness in all of their life
- Creating contexts where children, young people, young adults, adults, baby boomers, seniors of every culture and diverse backgrounds can grow and learn.
- Managing parallel change – graciously ministering to the existing church while planting new congregations to reach new people in new ways.
- Connecting into and serving the community in which you minister

It won't be easy. Like Paul, at times, you'll feel hard pressed, perplexed, struck down. Hopefully, like Paul, you'll know the power of the Holy Spirit to strengthen and sustain you.

'We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the all surpassing power is from God and not from us'.