

Dear Richard,

For this celebration of your priestly jubilee you have chosen the readings of the day. This might seem an unusual choice, and might be thought to present a challenge to the homilist (and I am grateful for the honour you do me in choosing me for the privilege!) until we remember that all the Scriptures, of both Old and New Testament, find the fullness of their meaning in the person of Our Lord Jesus Christ. And the same can be said of the priestly ministry for which we are giving thanks today: your priesthood, these last 25 years, and for as long as He chooses to preserve you in His service, is His priesthood. And it is through Him that we give thanks to the Father on this beautiful and joyful occasion.

Still, we might be a little bemused at the first reading, with its story about a notorious case of fraud, all the more shocking in that, at least implicitly, it is apparently sanctioned by the sacred writer. Jacob conspires with his mother to deceive his father into giving him the blessing meant for his elder brother Esau. The Fathers of the Church get round the unedifying character of the story by saying that it is an allegory: the transferral of the blessing from the elder to the younger son prefigures the two covenants. The blessing of being chosen by God passes from God's older people to the Church, God's new people. Jacob, who thereafter received the name Israel, represents Christ, and the Church, the new Israel, is His body.

We are told that Esau was a hairy man, while Jacob was a smooth man. Allegorically, St Augustine tells us, the vesting of Jacob in Esau's clothes and the covering of his smooth skin with rough, bristly goats' skins represents the incarnation, when the sinless Son of God took upon Himself our sinful human nature in order to regain for us God's blessings. The blessings pronounced by Abraham over his son were a prophecy of the blessings bestowed upon humanity in Christ: "May God give you dew from heaven and the richness of the earth, abundance of grain and wine!"

Twenty-five years ago, dear Richard, you too were vested in clothes not your own and made the minister of those blessings. By baptism you had already "put on Christ" in order to be an heir to the blessings, now you received from the Church the task of passing them on to others. The dew of the Holy Spirit is ours through baptism and confirmation. In the Eucharist, Christ's Body is the grain that gives us strength, and the Blood poured out for us becomes the wine of our joy. As priests, it is our greatest privilege to administer the sacraments, to be channels through which the dew of grace flows and servants setting out for God's people that sacred food and drink.

And the theme of feasting is taken up and developed in the Gospel. The Lord uses the image of a bridegroom to describe his relation to humankind. God has entered into the most intimate relation possible with humanity. The presence of the Bridegroom is a cause for joy and celebration. He is present here and His presence, more than any earthly blessing, is the cause of our joy.

And for 25 years now He has been making Himself present through you for the joy of those to whom you have ministered. Not only in the sacraments, but in the fruits of your ministry, in those you have encouraged and strengthened by word and example. In those too whom you have comforted in sorrow and supported in difficulties: the sick, the bereaved, the prisoners and asylum seekers, the sinners. To all of these you have sought to be a representative of Christ. And in spite of your human weakness and failures, He has reached out and touched them through you, spoken to them through you, as Abraham reached out and touched Jacob.

Of course, not all of this has been easy or pleasurable. There must be times when the bridegroom is absent, and then the attendants must fast. There are times when the presence of Christ is hard to find, even for the very one who must manifest it to others. There have been moments in your journey of doubt, confusion, pain and loss; sins and failings of your own, too, as in every human life. But these things too have a role to play. Christ bestowed his blessings on us through the drama of his passion and Cross, and every Christian life, every priestly life, must have some part in that drama in order to know definitively, at the end, the joy of the Resurrection.

I have been privileged to witness some of the ways in which you have borne the Cross with Christ; I am privileged today to participate in the joy of this celebration, as we give thanks that you have persevered thus far. In its way, today's celebration is a small foretaste of the infinite joy which will come at the end when that perseverance, please God, is rewarded. As for the sins, we can thank God with St Paul for the fruit they can bear in wisdom and in the increased compassion that is often the fruit of failure redeemed: "we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose." (Rom 8:28)

I have spoken much of joy. It is chief among the gifts which I ask of God for you in your ministry, today and in the future, and for God's holy people with and through you. And Joy is not a gift to be experienced alone. We share it with you, and present along with us today, though unseen, there are two witnesses and helpers to whom we turn for that gift of joy which they already possess in its fullness.

The first is the Immaculate Mother of God, in whose honour you chose to celebrate this Mass. She is invoked as *Causa Nostrae Laetitiae*, "Cause of our Joy", because her consent and cooperation were necessary for Jesus, her Son, to be for us the "Joy of heaven to Earth come down". May she continue to stand by you and intercede for you, so that with her today and for ever you may magnify the Lord, and exult in God your Saviour.

The other heavenly friend to whom we look for aid is your heavenly father St Phillip. More than thirty years ago you came to him to learn from him that secret of his which Blessed John Henry Newman sums up when he invokes him as *Lux sanctae Laetitiae*, "Light of Holy Joy". I cannot think of any other saint who teaches us so radiantly how to share day by day

the joy of knowing intimately the love of the heavenly bridegroom, while bearing the Cross cheerfully, both in the unchosen circumstances of life and in the voluntary asceticism of daily renunciation. May he continue to help you and all of us to get that difficult balance right.

And finally, as together we come before the altar to receive today from God the abundance of His grace, hidden beneath the forms of the grain and wine promised to Israel in abundance, may He continue to bestow upon all of us the joyful knowledge that the humble offering of our service, although presented in the frail, earthenware vessels that we are, is well pleasing to Him because He makes it one with the offering of His Son, a sacrifice of infinite worth. Amen.