

# **Feast of SS Peter and Paul**

## ***First Mass of Fr John Zheng SVD***

### ***Homily Notes***

It is a sad fact that, for whatever reason, ordinations have become relatively rare events in the life of our church. This is hardly the place to go into the reasons for this decline but it is surely a question that we will have to address with openness and courage in our church, since the priesthood remains at the centre of the life of our church, if only for the simple fact that the celebration of the Eucharist remains at the centre of our Christian life.

Whatever the bigger questions, however, we are delighted here at St Mary's this morning to have this celebration of the first mass of Fr John Zheng svd, who was ordained last Friday. As some of you will know, John spent much of the past year with us as a deacon and his presence and his service throughout the year were much appreciated.

I am personally very honoured that John has asked me to give the homily on this happy occasion. I have known him now for over five years when he first came to Ireland to study English and later theology, and for the past year I have worked with him as a teacher in All Hallows and during his pastoral year here at the parish. During that time we have shared quite a bit and I have come to appreciate some of the qualities that I know will serve him well in his ministry in the future.

It is certainly appropriate that he should be celebrating his first mass on the feast of those two enormous pillars of the Church, Saints Peter and Paul. Peter who uttered that marvellous declaration of faith: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" and became the rock upon which the Church is built. Paul who poured out his "life as a libation", who "fought the good fight", who "ran the race to the finish", who 'kept the faith' and indeed brought it to a wider world in a remarkable missionary life.

John is being called to a life as a missionary priest. Like both Peter and Paul he is allowing himself to be led by the Lord without knowing exactly where he is being led to. He is called to a life that is built solidly on Christ and his gospel in the service of the people of God in the world. He is being called to listen to the world, to be attentive to what is going on, to the questions people are asking, to be aware of need and suffering and to be ready, in the words of Pope Francis, to get his feet dirty going onto the streets of human life. Reading the world through the lens of the gospel, this is to be a true contemplative as well as a man of action.

In his recent teaching Pope Francis has spoken frequently of the priesthood and of the life of priest. In all of this he calls for an authenticity of life that will bear witness to the gospel. In his homily during the Chrism mass on Holy Thursday Francis called on priests to bring the healing power of God's grace to everyone in need, to stay close to the marginalized and to be "shepherds living with the smell of the sheep." He notes that those priests "who do not go out of themselves" by being mediators between God and men can "gradually become simply intermediaries, managers," and this is really not what priesthood or any form of Christian witness is about. "This is what I am asking you," he said "be shepherds with the smell of sheep."

In his few words after his ordination, John spoke very movingly and very simply of how he feels chosen by God, from his childhood. He did not choose God, God chose him. In calling John to the Society of the Divine Word, in inviting him to follow Christ as a missionary to Indonesia, rather than staying in China, this is what God has chosen John to do. Will it be easy, almost definitely not, it will be a life like all lives lived authentically and it will have many challenges: learning yet another language, coming to terms with another culture, entering the lives of a new people and, like St Joseph Freinadamez in Shantung, learning to love another people for what they are and on their own terms. These are both the challenges and the rewards of mission. It is often presented as a love of sacrifice and suffering, but from personal experience I can also say that it is also a life full of rewards and quite often a lot of fun. We have to learn to laugh with people as well as cry with them, since this is also what solidarity is about. John, you have already shown yourself to be ready for these challenges in many ways: in learning a new language, in coming into a new culture, in listening to us quietly as we chatter away as we do. This is already a lot.

Will there be moments of darkness and difficulty, almost definitely if you are to live a fully human life. Here again, however, you can go back to Peter and Paul. While we see them now as giants in the history of the church, great saints it is important to remember that they also had their weaknesses. They were not necessarily made for leadership. Remember Peter jumping out of that boat and sinking almost immediately, remember him when the cock crowed for the third time. Remember the often tempestuous Paul with what he calls that “thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud”. The Lord did not choose us for our strength or for our wisdom but

for our weakness and even our foolishness. This is his way and it is the one we have been called to follow.

Let me conclude with a short story somebody told me several years ago. A wise old priest died having been ordained for over fifty years. When he got to the gates he was met by St Peter. "Welcome Father", he said. "I see you have had fifty full years of ministry. Now that is impressive! You must have done a lot in your time." The old priest smiled wistfully at St Peter and thought back over those years without saying anything. Then he looked at Peter and said: "I won't say anything if you don't! I did what I could, I did my best." "None of us can say anymore in here" Peter said, smiling quietly, as he opened the gate and saw him through.

John, we will pray for you as we ask you to pray for us. Let me conclude in the name of all the community here at St Mary's with the lovely words of the blessing used by Bishop Jones at your ordination. Keep them engraved on your heart. :

*May God, who founded the Church and guides her still, protect you constantly with His grace, that you may faithfully discharge the duties of the Priesthood.*

*May he make you a servant and a witness in the world to divine charity and truth and a faithful minister of reconciliation.*

*And may he make you a true shepherd to provide the living Bread and the Word of life to the faithful, that they may continue to grow in the unity of the Body of Christ.*

*May God who has begun the good work in you bring it to fulfilment.*

