

## **The 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Year A: The call to be holy.**

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Exodus 19:2-6a: God calls Israelites a ‘Consecrated Nation’;**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: Romans 5:6-11: Jesus reconciled us – though sinful - to God;**

**Gospel: Matthew 9:36-10:8: Jesus sends out 12 ‘Disciples’ as ‘Apostles’.**

After about four months of the seasons of Lent & Easter, plus the big feasts of Trinity & Corpus Christi, we are back on the ordinary, ‘green’ Sundays of the Year. We return to our ‘home’ in Year A – St Matthew’s Gospel. This Sunday, it tells of Jesus’ decision to take twelve of his group of followers (‘disciples’) and make them ‘apostles’ – people who are ‘sent out’. This links up with Moses’ words in the first reading, at the time of the Exodus from Egypt (about 1250 BC): he heard God calling the people “a kingdom of priests, a consecrated nation”. This idea of being set apart for something special was basic to priesthood in both the Old and New Testaments. But how did it work, and does it still apply in today’s Church, with the troubles that have afflicted it recently?

The Old Testament Jews always had an ‘officer class’. From the time of Moses this was the priesthood formed by Moses’ brother Aaron and later developed as an inherited job by members of the tribe of Levi. (The history is too complex – and boring, if I’m honest - to discuss here.) Later, from the 800’s BC, the prophets appeared, and they were seen as God’s messengers to the people of Israel and Judah. Meanwhile, the priests became confined to the Temple system in Jerusalem, so as the years moved towards Jesus’ time, the people with far more influence were the Scribes, teachers of the law, etc, who belonged to the Pharisee party. The gospels show the enormous sway they held in every Jewish town and village, their opinions impacting on everyone - for good or ill.

I wish to concentrate on the New Testament idea of religious office, as this is what we use now. If you have access to the gospel text, please read it yourself, as it says a lot about how “apostles” – the role fulfilled by bishops today – were meant to see their work, and to behave. The first thing is that Jesus gave them authority (over unclean spirits, in this story) and the ability to heal. The Church says that bishops must have authority (in the best sense of the word - a fruitful leadership role) to do their job. In the case of the Apostles, this was not unrestrained ‘bossiness’: it was linked to their proclamation of the Kingdom of Heaven (ie, God’s loving influence over people) and their doing this for no personal gain – “You received without charge; give without charge.” Jesus himself did not use the word ‘priest’ to describe this work. As I said above, “apostle” simply meant ‘sent out’ – for a special purpose. It was St Paul who used the term ‘priest’ – in the sense of “elder” or “presbyter” - to describe men called to ministry. He also used the word “deacon” to refer to those chosen for the special tasks of preaching & administering charity. Over both groups were “presiding elders” – the people who would be shortly called bishops. Their role was to be the continuation of that of Jesus’ apostles. That was then; but what about now?

This is not meant as a history lesson, but it is obvious that, as the Church became embedded in society, each bishop became a leading figure in any community. In our region, County Durham's boundary 'welcome' signs boast of its being "The Land of the Prince Bishops". While this was a historical fact, it was not quite what Jesus or Saints Peter & Paul had in mind – to put it mildly. In 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Paul offers to Timothy (a youthful 'presiding elder', soon to be a 'bishop') the qualities needed for the job: having an "impeccable character"; being "temperate, discreet, courteous, hospitable; a good teacher...kind and peaceable". "People outside the Church should speak well of him."

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council's decree on "The Church" also mentions the work of bishops in paragraphs 26-27. It explains the power that bishops need, but "it is used only for the edification of their flock in truth & holiness, remembering that *he who is greatest should behave as the least; and the leader, as the servant.* (Luke 22:26-27).....They must remember the example of the Good Shepherd, who *came not to be served, but to serve.* (Mark 10:45). This idea of bishops' roles was not just pious writing: the decree was a 'dogmatic constitution', which means that all Catholics must accept it. I don't wish to get into controversy, but those very traditional people who wish to return the Church to its pre-1965 style must examine conscience here: do they accept Vatican II's teaching? If not, why not?

Our diocese has had a dreadful pasting in the media in recent weeks. The two reports that were published (one for the Vatican & one by the RC Safeguarding Agency) were brutally honest about the problems of Bishop Robert's regime: two seriously poor decisions and the non-Vatican II style of leadership. (That said, he was also a kind person: he was very considerate to me when I was ill in 2020.) Following his resignation, The Pope has wasted no time in giving us a new leader: Bishop Stephen Wright. Our newly-appointed bishop has written a letter to us all, in which he dedicates himself (in the style championed at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council) both to safeguarding and to a listening ministry. Quoting Pope Francis, he writes: *Blessed is the bishop who considers his ministry a service and not a power, making meekness his strength.* Those who have met him have been impressed by his commitment to national methods of protecting children & vulnerable adults.

Back to the Sunday readings (weirdly apposite to our diocesan situation!): Jesus saw a big number of leaderless people, and "he felt sorry for them, because they were harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd". Thankfully, Pope Francis has solved that problem for us. *Fr Jim Dunne.*