

2 March 2014

I went through my normal ritual of homily preparation when I looked at the Sunday readings on Wednesday morning, looked at the themes, tried to find a connection, that thread or idea to keep the homily tied together, stimulating, interesting and engaging for you, the poor people who have to listen to me every week! I often try very hard to link the readings to some event in the media in order to highlight a particular biblical theme or insight. But no matter how much I tried, no matter how much I turned the readings inside out looking for a theme, this week I was hopelessly and completely distracted – distracted by something that has affected me more than I imagined and in fact brought a little bit of sadness into my heart.

Ten days ago and without warning, I received an email from one of my colleagues advising that after a very long period of reflection, he was going to speak to the archbishop because he no longer wanted to be a priest. It was over. Ten years ordained, studies in Rome, half-way through his doctorate, a young, brilliant and up-and-coming biblical scholar, few of us had any idea that this was in the pipeline. But he is happy with his choice, grateful for the opportunities which the Church gave him and ready to move onto the next chapter of his life. While I admire my colleague's honesty and integrity and respect his decision enormously, I still feel a profound sense of sadness, a personal sadness and sadness for the Church. At a profoundly human level, it is the same sadness we feel when we hear of a marriage ending.

All our lives, we are dealing with that strange intersection of human nature and God's grace at work within us. Yes, God is supremely powerful but he also respects the human freedom that he has created. A person will respond to God's call and God's grace through the religious vocation and there may come a time in that person's life where, for a number of reasons, they no longer feel able to live that call. God respects that freedom and God is always faithful. Here it is on display in today's first reading, one of the shortest readings we find in the Sunday cycle. At times in life, there are challenges and we feel that the Lord has abandoned us. We might find ourselves in a dark and lonely place. But the prophet Isaiah reminds us, 'Does a mother forget her baby at the

breast?' Never; therefore God will not forget us or abandon us even when we make complex choices in life.

Today's Gospel is a huge call to trust in God and to not let ourselves be overwhelmed by the little things in life. It's very easy to trust in God when everything is going smoothly and there are no bumps in life. It's much harder to trust in God when we are beset by sadness, family tragedy, illness or sudden death. It is very hard to trust in God when people feel abandoned or suffer mental illness, or feel that they are tested beyond their capabilities. Trust is the mark of the disciple. That's where today's Gospel is going. If God cares for the birds in the sky, then surely he will care for each of us, surely he will hold us in the palm of his hand when the going gets tough. The mark of the disciple is to trust. The mark of the disciple is to set our hearts on God's kingdom first, and his righteousness and all the other things will be taken care of.

In today's second reading, St Paul states that we are Christ's servants, stewards entrusted with the mysteries of God. We carry this mystery of faith in the reality and fragility of our human lives, not as perfect human beings. We carry this in the joy and the sorrow, when our faith is strong and when our faith is weak. This happens in the continual unfolding of our life and faith. It is said that St Francis of Assisi spent countless hours sitting in front of the crucifix asking two simple questions, 'Lord, who are you and who am I?' In that constant questioning, the mystery of his life, his faith, his vocation and his witness would unfold.

I am profoundly sad that Stuart has left the priesthood. While a shared ministry has ended, the friendship will continue in a different way. I pray in thanks that he has found peace in his heart and I also pray that the God of abundant grace and blessing will guide him always and hold him in the palm of his hand. Today, I pray for that grace to be a disciple, to trust in the Lord when things are uncertain or when I am anxious, fearful and afraid. I pray for the grace to continue to be Christ's servant, a steward of the mystery of God. And today, I ask you to pray for me.