

Bishop Séamus Cunningham Retirement Mass
The Chair of St Peter 22 February 2019

First Reading: I Peter 5:1-4

Second Reading: Ephesians 3:14-21

Gospel: John 14:12. 23-27

The occasion of a significant Anniversary Mass or, as in tonight's instance, a significant Retirement Mass can present the preacher with a bit of a dilemma. He (she) must avoid the temptation to present a panegyric, a eulogy such as might be given at a Funeral Mass or Memorial Service. That said, I am pleased to say, to adapt those famous words of Mark Antony in Shakespeare's 'Julius Caesar' 'I come neither to bury Séamus nor to praise him.' What I have come for tonight, with I hope all of you gathered here, is to give thanks to God for Bishop Séamus' ministry as priest and bishop in our diocese over the past fifty three years. We have come to join with him in this celebration of the Eucharist as he, I think we may say with some relief, prepares to hand over the episcopal Hexham and Newcastle reins to his successor, Bishop Robert Byrne.

'Would you like to be a bishop?' is a question that some priests may have been asked from time to time or perhaps in a moment of vanity or fantasy have even asked of themselves. I suspect a general response might be 'God help you!' particularly in a time when any perceived privileges of such a high office are far out-weighted by the inevitable expectations, demands and pressures that come with the mitre, crozier and ring. This story may be apocryphal, but it is said that when the late Canon Tommy Murray was administrator here at the Cathedral in the 1970s and was asked by his then curates (including Séamus - he was a curate once, you know!) 'Canon, would you like to be a bishop?' he replied 'Oh yes, but just until after the reception!' I wonder how many bishops have, from time to time at least, wished that luxury might have been so for them.

There can be no doubt that the responsibilities of a bishop can be, are, at times, daunting. That is why it is so important for us, as we do in the Eucharistic Prayer at every Mass, to pray for our pope and our bishop. These sincere prayers offered by the clergy and the faithful are surely a genuine and powerful means of grace for those who are called to be shepherds of God's flock.

Today's first reading for this feast of the Chair of St Peter (I Peter 5:1-4) reminds us of the special role of the Roman pontiff and of all the bishops throughout the world in communion with him - 'Be the shepherds of the flock of God entrusted to you, watch over it, not simply as a duty, but gladly because God wants it.' 'Because God wants it' - I feel confident that is what you Séamus have taken to heart not only throughout your priestly ministry but perhaps especially in your ten years as our chief shepherd. We talk of priesthood as a vocation, God's call, for so indeed it is, and there can be no doubt that you heard and listened to that call to you and have responded to it with generous faithfulness and certainly never merely as a duty.

I'm sure there will have been many positive and uplifting experiences throughout your priestly life to balance against the more challenging, darker moments which inevitably will have come your way too. And we might then ask, what has sustained you in the course of this ministry, this service to God and his people? If we were to try to suggest what has been, what is, the lode stone/star, the guiding, magnetic influence in your spiritual and pastoral service, I expect we need not look much further than your choice for tonight's second reading. If Bishop Lindsay's leitmotif was "There are three things...." and Bishop Ambrose's was 'Marvellous!' then yours (or one of yours, together with 'lookit') is undoubtedly "Out of his infinite glory....." Chapter 3 vv 14-21 of St Paul's letter to the Ephesians you must know by heart - and I think most of us know it by heart now too! However, even at the risk of it becoming hackneyed, or of it being greeted by a sotto voce groan, at least from the clergy, you have unashamedly quoted it on countless occasions. And I dare to suggest that the reason you have so often done so is because this particular 'word of God' is potent with meaning for you and therefore as shepherd, guide, teacher, as our bishop, you have wanted it also to be potent for us. It is a splendid text, and in his commentary on it, Tom Wright (former Bishop of Durham and notable New Testament scholar) suggests that for St Paul and for all of us who seek to follow Christ, the best Christian teaching and Christian action emerge from the life of prayer. He says this: 'Those who want their actions to be effective for God's **kingdom**... should redouble their time and effort in prayer.' And he goes on to say what Paul's prayer here in this passage is all about, 'Essentially it is a prayer that the young Christians [i.e. the young Church at Ephesus] may discover the heart of what it means to be a Christian. It means knowing God as the all-loving, all-powerful father; it means putting down roots into that love - or, changing the picture, having that love as the rock-solid foundation for every aspect of one's life. It means having that love turn into a well-directed and effective energy in one's personal life. And it means the deep and powerful knowing and loving into which the Christian is invited to enter; or - to put the same thing another way - the knowing and loving which should enter into the Christian. Paul, quite clearly, knows all this in his own experience. He longs that those who have come to put their **faith** in Jesus should know it too.'¹ I suspect, Séamus, you couldn't have put it better yourself!

You may recall, the day before the announcement that you were to be the next Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle, you called to see me at the Cathedral [I was then Cathedral Dean] to discuss the arrangements for the press conference the next day. At that time, I didn't know it was you, of course, just that the new bishop would be announced the following morning. As we were talking, I was bold enough to ask if you could tell me who the new bishop was to be. You hesitated but then, in the strictest confidence, you told me. 'It's me', you said, and I don't know what my immediate reaction was or how I facially expressed it but you quickly said 'Well, there's no need to look so pleased about it!'

¹ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters - Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon*, SPCK, 2014, p. 39

Unlike Canon Tommy Murray's wish to have a very short episcopacy, yours has turned out to be somewhat longer than you or we might have expected given that you offered your resignation, as required, in July 2017, some 20 months ago. I feel sure that how you and we look back on your active and dedicated ministry as a priest and a bishop will always be in the context of your committed prayer life and your encouragement to us to make sure we also have a committed prayer life if we are to be able to take up the challenges that following Jesus inevitably entail. Both St Paul, and St John in tonight's Gospel, assure us that God's power and our belief in Jesus Christ can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine and that we can do great things in the Lord's name but only with true belief in and prayerful communion with him. You have believed this about yourself and have preached the same to us many times and we thank you for that.

Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor used to tell a lovely story of when a parish priest was leaving his parish and a new one was due to take over. As we bid Bishop Séamus adieu and await the arrival of Bishop Robert, I invite you all to go up a notch, as it were, and replace 'bishop' with 'pope' and '[parish] priest' with 'bishop' in this story:

A parish priest announced to his Sunday Mass congregation that the bishop was moving him, and that they would be receiving a new parish priest in the near future. As he stood at the back of the church and said farewell to his parishioners, a woman came up to him in floods of tears. 'Why are you crying?' asked the priest, 'Don't worry. The bishop will send you a lovely priest to take over from me.' The woman blew her nose and said, 'Yes Father, I know, but that's what the bishop said the last time!'

So, Séamus, no panegyric or eulogy for you (yet) but I'm sure your family, friends and flock here tonight and across the diocese would want to say we hope and pray that the Lord's peace will be truly with you in your well-deserved retirement and that, as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have so evidently made their home with you, they will continue to do so in Seaburn. Ad multos annos, vivas!