



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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TUESDAY IN HOLY WEEK, MARCH 30, 2021  
ISAIAH 49:1-7; PSALM 71:1-4; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31; JOHN 12:20-36

## CHRISM MASS AND RENEWAL OF VOWS

**John 12:20-36** [*Among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.*

*"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say-- 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered him, "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?" Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light."*

*After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.]*

Last month I was speaking to someone recently ordained to the diaconate in the Diocese of New Westminster and found myself asking her this question: "What's life been like for you since ordination? Has it felt any different from how life felt before you were ordained?"

She responded: "What's weird is just how much it feels the same as it did before ordination." Then she went on (and here I'm doing my best to remember what she said):

"You see," she said, "all the discernment, all the education, the internships, all the feedback and prayer, even some of the aggravation, all of it, shaped my identity as a deacon. Don't get me wrong—the ordination was wonderful and important, but it was really *the process* that created the mind and heart of a deacon in me. It was *the process*."

As I listened, I thought, "Of course! That's what my liturgics professor used to say—that often our liturgies express, quicken and

celebrate something that has already occurred. Liturgy is often after the fact.”

And so I found myself agreeing with this deacon. It's *the process* that makes us who we are, the gradual process—the small steps and mistakes, the small decisions, the day-to-day relationships and conversations that happen over and over and over again. It's *the process*. And, of course, the process never stops!

And yet...the vows and the ordination liturgy are also important—the vows that are made by the ordinand and by others, and the liturgy that gathers, expresses, quickens and celebrates what is going on. Even if we who are being ordained are only partially conscious at the time, it's the liturgy with all its component parts and flow that crystalizes our and the community's hopes and resolves in relationship to one another in God that also makes us a deacon or a priest or a bishop.

And, of course, for these same reasons, today's liturgy in which we renew our ordination vows, today's liturgy is important as well.

And so here we all are, some only a few years since their ordinations and others many years since their ordinations, and yet all of us with one more year of process added to our lives as ordained people. And what a year it's been.

Here we all are in the early part of Holy Week, drawing near again to the story of Jesus' last days leading up to his death and resurrection. Here we are all, I would suggest, still full of longing for the vocation we have already said “yes” to and aware that we have both lived

into the vows we once made and have fallen short of them. Here we all are still in process and still looking for how to stay present to this process.

And, of course, here Jesus is, in John's Gospel for today, uttering his last public words to his disciples and to the crowds before he draws apart to be alone with his inner circle.

And what does John's Jesus say? He utters those wonderful and frightening words that are at the core of the Paschal mystery, at the core of what he has come to do and at the core of the life of any who will follow him: “

“Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

In other words, unless you and I are willing to die to some things, to let go of some things, to turn away from some things, we won't be able to receive, as Ron Rolheiser says, the greater life and spirit that can move ever deeper into our relationship with God and with one another.

And so today, these are my words to you about the things that you and I have to die to over and over again as ordained people if we are to be like that grain of wheat that in dying bears much fruit. And you might say these things are also part of a description of that process we are a part of a long vocational path. You might think of these things as polarities along which we move back and forth in our vocational lives. And you might also think of these things as not only relevant

to being a deacon, a priest or a bishop but also important to anyone whose vocation is to follow Jesus.

And so what does God invite us to die to in order to live into something more?

First, God invites us to die to individualism and live, really live, by our baptism. This is an invitation to give up the idea that we are in this life, that we are in this vocation, all by ourselves, navigating things by our own wits. To live, really live, by our baptism means outstanding, or wise or talented or good looking...but just because. That choice on the part of the Creator forges, as the Prayer Book says, an indissoluble bond between God and us. It is a bond that cannot be undone by any person, cannot be undone by any pandemic, cannot be undone by any hurtful act perpetrated against us and cannot be undone by the many ways we have fallen short of the image of Christ.

Baptism secures our identity and dignity in God no matter what. It is our baptism that unites us to all the baptized and to all the world.

Live, really live, by your baptism when you are laid low, for it has the power to hold you up. Live, really live, by your baptism when you think too much of yourself, for it is the great equalizer.

Second, God invites us to die to our busy-ness and to live through prayer. Nothing, and I mean nothing, can make up for what has not happened through prayer in our lives. There is no faking it. Prayer creates realities,

changes perspectives, shapes communities, renews hearts and minds, and moves the great web of relationships that is the communion of saints. Our prayer changes us and, when done regularly, gives us a growing sense of what we should actually be praying about and for.

Do not rely on a time magically opening in your busy life to accommodate your prayer life. Do not wait for feeling to prompt prayer. Find a pattern of prayer, a rhythm of prayer, and then make room for it and follow it. Archbishop Michael Ramsey was once asked how long he prayed each day. He said this: "Two minutes, but it takes me twenty-eight minutes to get there." Find time to be open to an awareness of God's presence every day, no matter how long it takes, no matter what form it takes and no matter how long you have been ordained. Or as Sarah Coakley, said: "Pray as you can and not as you can't. Just pray!"

Third, God invites us to die to some of our expectations of others and to live by loving the people right in front of us. Some of us are given people in our lives who are easier to love; some of us are given people in our lives who are more difficult to love; some of us are given people we cannot stop loving no matter how much space and time we, or the guidelines of a diocese, put between us. Find a way to love the people, the real people, in the community in which you serve or, heck, in the household in which you live. Find a way to give your heart even if the people you minister among aggravate you, even if they

don't "get it," even if they don't particularly love you. And then, when the time comes, love them enough to let them go. This is the very odd and difficult part of what many of us do as ordained people: we put ourselves in relationship with those among whom we serve in parish life or in the life of a ministry we are called to, and then we have to let them go. And so again, die to some of your expectations of others and love the people right in front of you.

Fourth, God invites us to die to perfection and to live into imperfection and, where needed, apology. Some of us were raised to believe that messing up, that making a mistake, that apologizing for something was tantamount to defeat, that admitting to being in the wrong or at fault was admitting to weakness. But I say to you, let yourself out of the jail of perfection. Join with those of us who not only make mistakes but who do it regularly and with feeling. Be generous in offering apologies. Let those areas you find you need to apologize about frequently be as an open door to you in terms of what you need to learn more about and, yes, even consider doing something about. Admit your vulnerabilities, your limitations, your unconscious biases, your death-dealing tendencies. Be open to doing better next time and then the time after that and then the time after that. We don't have to be perfect. Oh my gosh, we are not perfect. Die to the idea of perfection. Admit your imperfections and, yes, your screw-ups. Offer your apologies freely.

And, finally, God invites us to die to independence and live by relying on others. These vocations, the vocations of deacon, priest and bishop, are not really vocations for independent operators. Find a spiritual director. Pull together a council of advice on some important piece of work you want to do. Get a therapist. Invite someone to be your spiritual friend. Make an appointment to kick things around with your bishop. Go out of your way to be in relationship with and listen to someone whose experience is really different from your experience whether that difference is about gender, race, orientation, economic or citizenship status, vocation, or age. You will find yourself and your ideas enriched. And so, lower your guard. Invite someone into your world and then listen, listen to their perspective and let it in. Let go of your independence and learn to nurture and even cherish relying on others.

Jesus said "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Beloved colleagues, this Holy Week, these words are meant for you and for me. For once again the Creator yearns to bring abundance from the place where a single grain has fallen to the earth. Once again, Jesus shows us that it is through death and loss that God makes new things. And once again the Spirit is moving to draw us more deeply into the lives and vocations that are already ours.