



The Mass texts this Sunday bring to my mind that rousing Gospel acclamation by the St Louis Jesuits, *Speak*

Lord, I'm listening, with its refrain lifted straight from the encounter between Samuel and the Divine One which is the Lectionary choice for the first piece of scripture this Second Sunday of Ordinary Time.

The locus of the vision is the sanctuary of God at Shiloh, the dwelling place of the Ark of the Covenant, a setting echoed in the call of Isaiah which would take place later in Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem, the divine word being placed abundantly on Isaiah's unworthy lips just as it was graciously communicated to the inexperienced young Samuel. Indeed, Samuel thinks the voice is that of Eli the priest, but Eli understands that it was the Lord calling the boy and instructs him to answer the voice with the words, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening".

Samuel's response to the call finds an echo in our response in this Sunday's Psalm 39:
Here I am Lord, I come to do your will. Samuel at first does not recognise that it is the Lord who is calling him, because he has not yet had a personal experience of God, despite being an "altar boy" in the sanctuary. He needs Eli's advice on how to respond. Our Psalm 39 repeats the idea that God wants from us an open ear, a willingness to respond to the promptings of the Spirit rather than making great sacrifices. Our presence to God is what is desired. Some of the hymns we sing this Sunday take up that very theme: *Here I am, Lord, O Jesus, I have promised to serve you to the end, Oh, the word of my Lord, deep within my being,* to name a few.



I've found myself pondering the priesthood in these days of new year. I find myself reflecting that the diocesan priesthood is not the ploughing of a lone furrow or a vocation primarily for self fulfilment; it is a rather – as I see it anyway – a

Sacrament of Encounter, of friendship with the Lord and his people. To borrow from the conversation of this Sunday's Gospel [John 1:35 - 41], we say, "Rabbi, *Where do you live*" and He responds "Come and see". The ministry of the priest is wide and varied; it is both rooted and sustained in the transforming power of the Liturgy, but it takes us beyond the Liturgy, into the world.

Most of all, it takes us to the parish; and the parishes have, I am sure, been my greatest blessing over my more than thirty three years in ministry. Parishes are eclectic, diverse, as people are. But the parish is where the Church really *lives*. In the parish, the priest is called to connect, engage, serve, befriend and so to help the parish itself become that *sacrament of encounter* with the Lord. The parish is to be – as Pope Francis has said - mission orientated, not self absorbing.

In recent days, while looking back in reflection, I've said to myself, "*Where have the years gone?*" I find myself – to paraphrase the Prophet Jeremiah as I've done before - "*standing at the crossroads, looking back to see what stood me in good stead long ago*". Way back I must have experienced that *Come and See* moment. I probably didn't fully know it at the time, but I guess I was saying "*Rabbi, where do you live?*" He said, "*Come and see*". And to continue that gospel turn of phrase, I "*spent the day with him*".

That's how it is, not only for priests, but for all of us who welcome Him into our lives as the *Divine Companion* on our journey. That *day* for all of us who draw close to Him, whatever our vocation, opens out to months and years and eventually we find - to use the words of the great Isaiah - that he has given us, priests and people, something of a *disciple's tongue*. "Each morning", that Prophet says, "*he wakes me to hear, to listen like a disciple*". And so, we can sing of his love, *for ever, for ever, for ever*, as a wonderful setting of Psalm 88 puts it.

Gathered round the altar, we experience the deepest expression of our *joyful song* at being caught up in divine love. On Sundays in the bread broken and wine poured out in that wellspring of hope, the triumph of grace over sin is manifested, and the pledge of happiness without end is promised.

So today we gather and raise our voices in the hymns and songs we love and which bind us together in faith and hope; we treasure the truth that in the Mass we meet the Risen Lord in a unique and abiding way. We remember that it is there, in the Eucharist that we place our trust in Him, against the constant fear of nothingness and unworthiness. That is the place where we find shelter and build that house on rock which he urged us to do. It is there that we find something to hold on to when all we love is dying; it is there where those who have gone beyond, meet with us who are left behind. There in the Mass, our past and present meet and there, most delightfully, we taste our everlasting future.