

May 28, 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This weekend, on May 31, parishioner Gregory Burch (and 26 others) will be ordained to the permanent diaconate by Cardinal O'Malley at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston: a day of great joy for our parish community! Although I've not (as of writing this) received official word, I look forward to Gregory being assigned to Holy Family Parish for his ministry.

On this Sunday morning at the 11:30 Mass, Gregory will preach for the first time. I would imagine that he is experiencing equal amounts of joy, anticipation and anxiety as this homiletic moment approaches! Let me share with you a reflection on the preaching ministry and invite you to pray for Gregory as his ministry begins:

THE MINISTRY OF PREACHING

Yours is a share in the work of the Lord's Spirit
who opens our hearts to the Good News of salvation.
Yours is the ministry of the table of God's Word.
Yours is the work of breaking open the scriptures
that God's people might be nourished by the food of the Lord's Word.
Yours is the ministry of Jesus who came to announce that the reign of God is at hand.
Yours is the voice that opens for us the challenge and the consolation of the gospel.
Yours is to tell a story that tells the story of God's love for us.
Yours is the prophet's ministry among the hometown people.
Yours is the task of announcing:
promise, when hope is gone;
love, when it has cooled;
justice to the oppressed and the oppressors;
joy, when tears run freely;
and God, when we are less than human.

Come to your work from your personal prayer,
come filled with the Word that judges and saves your own life.
Bear the book of the gospels
as the weight of God's judgment and the breadth of God's mercy.
Carry this book as the Ark of the Covenant: with reverence, awe and wonder.

Proclaim the gospel as if our lives depended on it: they do.

Proclaim the Good News as though we had never heard it: we are slow to understand.

Prepare your proclamation of the gospel as carefully as you prepare your homily:
the one will never fail; the other may be forgotten.

Come to your preaching mindful of your own need to hear the gospel message:
when you do this, your word is clear and true.

Preach the scriptures: that is all we need to hear.

Pray for God's Spirit to illumine your mind and heart with the light of Christ.

Let your preaching speak to this age, but not be conformed to it;
let your thoughts be transformed by the renewal of your mind in Christ Jesus,
- then we shall be re-created.

Preach to us as people you have come to know;
we will come to know you well by what you preach.

Struggle as you must when preaching the difficult text or the hard saying:
your honest struggle helps us in our own.

Spare us the used homily when those scripture texts come 'round again:
our lives have changed, as has your own,
and we hunger for fresh food from the gospel table.

When the Lord has been sparing of inspiration, be brief: we will understand.

Let not even your own sin hold back from us the gospels' demands.

Preach the Word in season and out of season.

Do not shrink from naming what is sinful:
how else will we know our need for salvation?

Preach sin and grace for this is what we know the best - and need to hear again.

Preach the reign of God in our midst: help us to know its signs and presence.

Tell us the story of God's mercy: no other story is more important.

Show us Jesus dying and rising among us: this is what we have come here to see.

When your brothers and sisters praise and thank you for your work,
take delight in the Word that has nourished them
and rejoice in the work the Lord has accomplished through you.

Be faithful in the work you do, for through it the Lord saves his people.¹

At the Rite of Ordination to the Diaconate, the Bishop speaks these words to the newly ordained as he hands them the Book of the Gospels:

Receive the Gospel of Christ,
whose herald you have become.
Believe what you read,
teach what you believe,
and practice what you teach.

Pray with me that these words will guide Gregory's ministry in the diaconate!

Sincerely,
Fr. Fleming

¹ *Preparing for Liturgy: A Theology and Spirituality*, Austin Fleming (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 1997) 120-122.