

Archdiocese of Birmingham



HOMILY

Preached by

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at the

MASS FOR RELIGIOUS

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ST CHAD'S CATHEDRAL, BIRMINGHAM

May God make you ready to do his will in any kind of good action.

Those words from the Letter to the Hebrews – our first reading today – have the form of a blessing. They are an invocation asking God to prepare us, to give us the right disposition so that we can discern what good deed we can undertake. This blessing is not about making us do God's will but enabling us to be the kind of people who will see what God wants of our lives and then have the energy, commitment and desire to do it.

This blessing opens up the meaning of obedience. Obedience is a disposition of life to which you have made a life-long commitment as Religious. When I was ordained as deacon in 1981 I promised *respect and obedience* to my bishop and since coming to Birmingham, in 2009 I have been conscious of the way that promise shapes and influences the relationship between a priest or a deacon and the bishop of the diocese.

As Religious women and men you have taken a vow of obedience and you have a rich collective experience of what it means to live by this disposition day by day. You will also know how to guide others towards hearing and recognising God's will in their own lives. At its heart this life of obedience is not submissiveness but joyful disposition to be where the Lord needs us to be and to serve those who are most in need of our time and our availability.

Obedience involves listening. It means blocking out all the other noises that can claim our attention and making space to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit. It involves drawing closer to Christ so that we can hear what he is saying to us in the Scriptures, through the sacraments, in the needs of others and in the experiences of our lives. We need the obedience of the sheep who instinctively trust the shepherd to lead them to good pastures.

Today's Gospel tell us of the compassion of Christ for the crowd who had followed him: *he took pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd*. Last week at the Joint Meeting of Anglican and Roman Catholic Bishops here in Birmingham we invited the Cambridge theologian, Professor Janet Soskice to reflect on our discussions. She had some remarkable insights to share from her reading of the Scriptures and in particular what we could learn from Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

Professor Soskice noted that the fundamental calling of the Christian is first to follow and then to go out. We obey Christ by following him and that means that we rarely see his face. When Moses, who was closest of all the prophets to God, came into God's presence he could not look upon the face of God but hid in the cleft of the rocks as God passed by. When we look towards Jesus, if we are following him we only see him from behind. Obedience disposes us to trust in him and to wait for him to reveal his face to us.

You have been given a distinct and special calling within the life of the Church. Your way of life as Religious is a gift that the Church cherishes and I know how precious that gift is to the life of this Archdiocese. You witness to the presence of the Good Shepherd in our midst by your life of obedience, listening for his voice and being disposed to go where he

needs you to be. As Religious you are very often on the road with Christ, travelling from place to place to be with people, to reach them, responding to his invitation to go now to those most in need.

St Mark's Gospel offers us the invitation to *come away to some lonely place...and rest for a while* with the Lord. This is a moment to reflect on your calling to Religious life and ask Jesus to renew its vision and energy within you for the good of others. As you do so, you become aware with the apostles of the many people that our Lord also wants you to serve: *he took pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he set himself to teach them at some length.*

Today's Mass always has a special moment when we recognise our jubilarians and thank the Lord for their dedicated and loving commitment and their witness over so many years. It also gives us a moment for the renewal of your Religious vows recalling the day when you first made these commitments some years ago. The whole life of the Church is enriched by your commitment. We are more aware than ever that poverty, chastity and obedience are most fruitful when they are lived within the embrace of God's love and when they prompt us to be loving towards others.

Dear friends, as you renew your commitment today may your words be a reminder of the love of Christ that is to shine from within your lives in those places and for those people where he will send you in the coming year. And may all that you see of Christ's goodness within the people you serve hold you close to the Lord throughout all the years to come.