

The Bishops of England and Wales have designated this year as a Year of Priests and have asked us to find some time in this month of February to talk about our vocations. I love being a priest – it may sound presumptuous, but I do feel deep down that this is exactly what God wants me to do. I have my ups and my downs but I thank God every day for the wonderful gift that he has given me, the gift of holy scripture and being able to expound and preach it, the gift of the Eucharist and being able to stand at the altar of God and offer the holy gifts of bread and wine for you and with you, the holy people of God, the gift of prayer and being able to help others in prayer, and, most amazing of all, the gift quite simply of God's great love and care and being able to share that love with the sick and the healthy, the young and the old, the dying and the mourning, the happy and the sad.

So many blessings, so many joys. And yet, I feel that my priesthood, all priesthood, all attempts at worship or service stand under the great judgement of God.

*"How happy are you who are poor..."* Is my priesthood steeped in being poor, or is it more about status, privilege and power?

*"Happy you who are hungry now..."* I reckon to eat at least one square meal every day. In what sense am I ever hungry?

*"How happy you who weep now..."* I do weep sometimes. I do get anxious sometimes, but laughter and joy are my more familiar companions. To what extent do I really share the grief and tragedies that so many people experience?

Pope Francis speaks of a poor Church at the service of the poorest. How to put this into action? How to maintain all the fabric of parish life, school life and family life, while at the same time being an authentic servant of the poor? How to make myself totally available?

*"A blessing on the man who puts his trust in the Lord, with the Lord for his hope"* is God's message to Jeremiah. 'Trust in the Lord' rather than 'trust in man' and 'the things of the flesh'. Maybe this is the key to a priestly vocation. Trust in the Lord rather than trust in Popes and Bishops, trust in the Lord rather than in the outward show and all that paraphernalia of clerical life, trust in the Lord and only in the Lord.

Looking back now over 39 years of ministry there have been plenty of false turns, missed opportunities and a persistent stubbornness in the face of all that God is trying to give me.

But, at its best, my vocation has always been about trusting in the Lord, from the first steps of progress as a child, praying and living through personal bereavement, deciding to become a Catholic, working as a priest – in a school, hospital and parish.

Priesthood does of course throw up all sorts of gender and sexuality issues and perhaps a little bit foolishly I might try to tackle them next week. Meanwhile *trust in the Lord and be like a tree by the waterside*. And live your priesthood to the full. Fr Michael