

JUBILEE HOMILY

Preached by Fr Tom McNamara SMA at the Thanksgiving Mass in the Chapel of the African Missions, Dromantine, Newry, Co Down on Friday, 30 June 2023

Mass readings: Jeremiah 1:4-9 and Luke 4:16-22.

“Congratulations to Liam Brady, Michael McKee and Tom Wade celebrating 50 years of Priesthood and to Kevin Mulhern celebrating 25 years.

Liam Lawton in his song, *There is a place* wrote lines that are very appropriate for this occasion:

“There’s a time for remembering, a time to recall.

The trials and the triumphs, the fears and the falls.

There’s a time to be grateful for the memories so blest.

The jewels of our memory where love is our guest.

There is treasure in the field, treasure in the skies...

“There is gold that is gleaming in a past we once knew” (for Kevin “silver”)

And wherever we gather in the light of God’s grace....”

We gather today in the light of God’s grace to give thanks for you and the many years of your treasure, “the treasure within, the pearl of great price, your priestly ministry. We **celebrate - Priesthood**, celebrate “**Vocation**” – you were called by God to follow Jesus in a particular way as **Missionaries in the SMA**, the Society of African Missions. Like Mary in the Annunciation story and Jeremiah in the first reading today you may have **expressed surprise and shock** at first. “What! You are calling me, to be a priest – How can I do this”? God responded, as Jesus quoted in the Gospel “**the Spirit is given, will be given to you**”. You are to be anointed with that same Spirit that came on Jesus, Mary, Jeremiah. God is with you.

You presented yourselves. You were **anointed with the Spirit**. With fondness and gratitude, you remember **Ordination** day, the **people present, those who had journeyed with you**, who supported you through the years– your **parents, siblings, family, relations, neighbours, teachers, friends, SMA confreres, formators, parishioners**. We pray with gratitude for SMA sponsors benefactors and supporters.

We remember and pray for your classmates, those who left along the way and those who were ordained with you, especially those who have died: James Fegan, Vincent Glennon, and Michael Nohilly. May they rest in peace.

We also remember Gerry Hanna, Gerry Thompson and Frank Diamond ordained and later chose a different lifestyle.

Individually, each one of us has a different story of joining SMA just as we have a unique personal story of our journey through life.

And we survived as best we could, sometimes with joy and gladness, which easily expressed our True Self. During the SMA Retreat which ended yesterday we were told that the true self is “the beloved son of God – “Abba”. I use the term in this case “Bar Abba”.

On the other hand, there are times when we wear masks and hide behind our defence mechanisms. This is the **False Self** called “the **Ego**”. There I leave the path of God/Abba to go to my false gods. I am then the “Bar Abbas” – son of many false gods, crying out as at the trial of Jesus, “crucify him, let Barabbas go free” for in the false gods of possessions, or achievements I may find the needed approval that I crave. The quick buzz does not bring lasting peace but feeds the Ego – E G O – “Edging God Out”.

Your story: my story: a man, a priest, SMA. That is **What** I am. **Who** am I? Erik Erikson, a development psychologist wrote of the Eight stages of life – from conception to Senior Years.

The first stage he named **Trust v Mistrust** – whether at birth we trusted or mistrusted the initial caregiver, how we survived the sibling rivalry and the family system we were born into. We know that our needs would not always be met when we cried out but how we were dealt with was important as it was in all the stages Erikson talked of. The second stage was **Autonomy versus shame**, (in our potty training how mess was tolerated) then **Initiative versus guilt** (as the child was beginning to separate and explore what was allowed or discouraged). **Industry v inferiority** – how our efforts in school were affirmed or discounted. In Adolescence **identity v confusion** comes to the fore and later **intimacy v isolation**.

How we coped through the different stages had and has a bearing on our mental, emotional, physical and spiritual well-being. One of those stages may well be blocking my well-being now. Example, If I found it difficult to **trust** in my early years, how can I easily surrender now to a loving Father / God?

“It is important to acknowledge what has passed” Joyce Rupp says. “If we don’t deal with our suffering, our pain, our anger, our regrets we become very bitter and closed and all our energy goes in the direction of negativity. **This may lead us to despair”**.

I draw your attention to the seventh stage that Erikson named **Generatively V Stagnation**. It covers age **40 – 65** and referred to as entering the **second half of life**. As we look back at our younger days, the first half of life, we remember the energy that sustained us then and how we **generated new life** with enthusiasm and zeal, running schools, building churches, visiting outstations, celebrating two, three Masses daily. Wow! We painfully know that that **energy** is not there now. Many **changes** have occurred in the meantime, changes physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally, changes in SMA, GAA, changes in the world, changes in the church.

Rather than becoming **non-generative** and **stagnant** as we get older, a grieving process needs to be acknowledged and addressed – grieving the passing of years, being less mobile, decreasing mental awareness, loss of energy, loss of interest, thoughts of not having had possible fruitful experiences – such as marriage, children, challenges to our belief system, mission theology, our profession challenged in an ever-changing Church and world.

I think of confreres who in bygone years bemoaned the lack of preparation for retirement and were consequently quite bitter. We know better now, invited to “stay connected” and talk it out, to name and meet my hurts in order to let them go, in order to forgive, in order to heal. Matthew Linn wrote a book many years ago *Healing the eight stages of Life*.

Erikson’s Eight and last stage he named **Integrity v Despair – age 65+**. **In place of despair**, “the mask” is taken off and responsibility for self is acknowledged, integrating everything good, bad or otherwise. With renewed interest I open myself to the Lord in vulnerability and honesty, being true to self.

Richard Rohr advises, “in place of being embittered we become the Holy Fool who integrates everything in life, giving thanks for all the blessings received and all the achievements accomplished, knowing that what is important and what sustains us is **the spirit of God**.”

Sometimes we greet others by asking, “how’s the form. Are you in form?” I now may ask “Are you inspired”? In form is reminding me of information. We have the knowledge and facts but are we Wise? Inspired is in “Spiritus” in with and of the Spirit. It means breath, breathing in deeply the breath of Life, the breath of God, the Holy Spirit – being alive.

It is to stand in AWE before God, to come to the Eucharist to surrender as best I can. AWE – Assemble for Word and Eucharist prayerfully aware of receiving the empowerment and

energy of the Spirit, a Spirit of Forgiveness rather than retaining past hurts and bitterness, a Spirit we are told (Romans 8) will do the work in us.

I end with a prayer:

‘Lord, where are you inviting me to serve you in being a non dual compassionate presence for others today and for myself? “Here I am Lord, as I am Lord. Maybe I am no longer in the driver’s seat nor am I in control. However, in this age and spirit of Wisdom I believe that I can be led, guided, loved, and prayed through as a co-creator with you Lord – In Communion with SMA confreres, with gratitude to the Society I lift up my heart in thanking you, Lord. In prayerful wishes to Liam, Michael, Tommy and Kevin. We congratulate them on the occasion of their respective jubilees. Amen.”’

Fr Tom McNamara SMA