

Homily given by Fr John McCluskey MHM

Fifty years ago today, in the College Chapel at St Joseph's, Mill Hill, Len was ordained priest as a Mill Hill Missionary. There is much to remember and to celebrate as we pause at this stage in his journey and look back over half a century of priestly ministry, but I suggest we reflect on one striking aspect of the story which can be illustrated by setting it in the framework suggested by the first read of today's liturgy, from the Prophet Amos [7:12-15].

There we find the priest Amaziah turning on the prophet Amos and hounding him out of the country; 'Go away, seer; get back to the land of Judah...we want no more prophesying in Bethel; this is the royal sanctuary, the national temple'. Priest against prophet. Priest, the upholder of the institutions of religion, its rituals and traditions, and its power. Prophet, the visionary daring to claim inspiration from God, and speaking with the breath and voice of God—'Thus says the Lord God' - speaking truths that are unwelcome and unacceptable. Each time it occurs it seems an unequal contest, the priestly power of the institution prevailing...only for God to raise up fresh prophets, charged to speak again unwelcome truths.

It was Cardinal Newman who reminded us that both priest and prophet are essential for the good order of the Church, and that the tension that may be felt between them is meant to be creative, bringing and holding together differing strengths and gifts; the priest ministering to the pastoral needs of the people of God, and sustaining the prayer life and traditions of the Church; the prophet breathing life into the teaching of the Church, listening intently to the word of God and discerning God's presence and call in the signs of the times. Priest and prophet are both called to mediate God's presence in our world, but it often falls to the prophet not only to read the signs of the times but also, often more difficult and dangerous, to speak their truth boldly and in God's name.

An important aspect of the story of our times is that we are consciously striving to restore the balance between the two, as I think we can see reflected both in the Church's story during this past half century and in the story of Len's priestly and teaching ministry.

It was in January 1959, the year of Len's ordination, that Pope John XXIII surprised and puzzled not a few by announcing that he intended to convoke a Council. I don't know how Len and his classmates experienced this, but my memory of the three years prior to the opening session of the Second Vatican Council is of priestly voices of caution counselling against any extravagant expectations; there were, of course, prophetic voices but the word on the ground, in the parishes, tended to be; "don't get your hoes up, nothing much is going to change". But there can be no doubting that the meeting of the Council [1962-1965] proved to be the pivotal event in the life of the Church, radically changing our perception of ourselves as Church and firing many with something of the passion and vision of the prophet. Key words, which we now take for granted, bear witness to this change; *renewal*— what would this have meant to us 60 years ago? *Conversion*—before the Council we reserved this for non-Catholics ('converts') and pagans 'coming into the Church', and now we embrace it as a necessary lifelong process for us all; and *Ongoing Formation*—before the Council *Formation*, such as it was, preceded and ended with ordination or profession and now we accept that it is an ongoing, lifelong process.

When we recall the story of Fr Len's 50 years of priestly ministry in this context it is not difficult to recognise the same pattern and development unfolding, and the emergence of those same key words—*renewal*, *conversion*, *formation* and *ongoing formation*—as guiding lights beckoning him forward. And we may say that if the Second Vatican Council is the pivotal event in the life of the Church during these 50 years, equally the launching of the Institute of St Anselm can be said to be the pivotal event in the story of Fr Len's priestly and teaching ministry. He will remember the early years of searching, of reading the signs of the time, experiencing the need for a more rigorous approach to formation—incorporating and integrating the disciplines of psychology and spirituality—and also the need for specific and focused preparation for leadership within the Church. He will know also that while it is one thing to read the signs of the times, and to begin to see what needs to be done, it is quite another and more daunting thing to dare to stand up, speak up, and step out to do what needs to be done for the vision to take flesh.

And so it is appropriate that we join with Fr Len today in celebrating Eucharist with him—truly giving thanks for the wonders God has done, in the Church and through Fr Len's priestly and teaching ministry, and looking forward with him full of confidence and hope for the future flourishing of what God has begun—in the Church and through the Institute of St Anselm.