

Chrism Mass 2017

The Coming by RS Thomas

*And God held in his hand a small globe. Look he said.
The son looked.
Far off, as through water, he saw a scorched land of fierce color
The light burned there; crusted buildings cast their shadows:
A bright Serpent, a river uncoiled itself, radiant with slime.
On a bare hill a bare tree saddened the sky.
Many People held out their thin arms to it,
As though waiting for a vanished April to return to its crossed boughs.
The son watched them.
Let me go there, he said.*

"Let me go there" Jesus said to God the Father. And he did.

Let me go there to Bethlehem, to Nazareth in Galilee, to Jerusalem and then to the Cross.

From the Incarnation to the Cross and Resurrection, Jesus said: "Let me go there."

And God said to humanity: Here's my baby boy, do what you want with him. And we took God up on the offer, didn't we?

And we laid the wood to him.

John Snow in his book The Impossible Vocation, calls what we do, well, an Impossible Vocation. What makes our vocation impossible is what we preach and teach and model for the world to see. When people come to us for help and guidance, they've already decided what they want from us. It might be \$50 for a bus ticket home. It might be to tell them that they are completely right and their spouse is all wrong. It might be that they want to hear that we agree with their view of the world. Or, it might be as mundane as this: "Mrs. Jones never should've moved the former rector's picture out of the parish hall."

People come to us with the answer to their questions or problems often already formulated in their heads. What they want is for us to do is agree with them, do what they want, and then baptize that answer as the way of Jesus.

But then we put a fly in the ointment, don't we?

We suggest maybe that they need to look at their own lives and actions. We point out their prayer life needs to be more consistent; or that maybe they need to work on forgiveness themselves and not insist it's only someone else's need.

In other words, in some ways, we don't help them at all. We are wrongly labeled as members of the so-called "helping profession." We mess with people. We mess with their lives and their families. Is it any wonder that some of our parishioners really don't like us?

We must be clear if we're going to thrive in ministry: We aren't really about helping people in the way they often expect. What we're about in our ordained vocations is the Gospel. We're saying with Jesus: "Let me go there." And where we go may not be where our people want us to go.

So, this makes our vocation if not impossible, at least very challenging. Sometimes we will be out in front of our people urging them along. At other times, we will be behind them nudging them forward. And at even other times, we will be walking along side them as their companion in the way.

Leading God's people requires us to admit that we're not leading at all. Jesus has already said: "Let me go there," so we're just following him to the place he has already gone.

We are following him into the tragedy of a teen suicide.

We are following him into the pain of a failed marriage.

We are following him to the desperate side of a parishioner who just lost his job.

But we are so following him to the presence of that young person who has just realized God loves her no matter what;

To that retiree who finally has come to realize he can forgive the one who hurt him;

To those young parents who hand their children to us so in the waters of baptism their sin can be washed away.

These and in many other places and circumstances you and I have the privilege of following him who so long ago said: "let me go there."

Our vocation is not therapy and counseling. It is not bucking up the culture to make it a little less coarse or a little bit nicer. It is not baptizing whatever the community already wants to believe.

Our vocation is to embody the Good News of the liberating and life-giving grace of God in Jesus. Our vocation is to echo with our lives the words of Jesus in the poem: "Let me go there."

Ours is a lonely, impossible vocation. Our spouses think they understand what we're going through, and they want to empathize, but they really can't. Our mature lay leaders are supportive, and they want to be our partners, but they can only partner with us so far.

Only those of us who have taken a stand in the midst of the people and insisted only on "Jesus Christ and him crucified" can really understand what this vocation is all about.

That's why we need one another more than we realize. So, stay connected. Don't get too lonely or too cut off from one another. When we clergy "crash and burn" from my experience it is usually because we have cut off from one another. Our being alone turns into loneliness. And then, it all falls apart.

So, stay close to one another. Be fully present with each other. And stay very close to the one who said: "Let me go there."