

Requiem Mass. Canon Giles Goward.
Monday 8th February 2021. Oscott College Chapel

I'm so grateful that a 'Cana crisis' only happened once in all the years I went on holiday with Fr Giles. Instead of the usual destinations of France, Italy or Spain, for some reason we'd decided on a change and give North Africa a go - and so we ended up in Morocco for a couple of weeks. We arrived quite late at night, and it didn't start well as we were stopped by the police and fined for speeding within 20 minutes of arriving - or rather he was! And sadly, it was to only get worse. For the next morning we went off to stock up on the necessities - as you do when self-catering - and at each of the three supermarkets we tried there came the same comment - but with increasing desperation - 'they have no wine.' Eventually we made a disturbing discovery - we had landed for our holidays in the middle of Ramadan, and all those shelves which would usually make glad the heart of man had been cleared in its honour! It was at moments like this that you can appreciate Giles's perseverance and tenacity - and although there was nobody to change water into wine - he certainly made sure that that other gospel assurance 'seek and you shall find' found fulfilment - and abundantly - if not necessarily legally!

It was in his early years that Giles felt a nudge, a call, a vocation to serve God in the ministry of the Church of England in which he had been raised. In those days you had to go along to a selection conference called ACCM which lasted a couple of days or so where you'd be interviewed by a bishop, some clergy and a smattering of worthy laypeople. A few days later you would receive a letter which said 'yea', or 'neigh' or 'maybe'. Giles got a letter saying 'neigh' - they didn't think that he was suitable for ordained ministry. God alone knows what he'd said! This always gave him a wry sense of amusement in later years, especially when he was appointed, first pastoral director, and then rector, of this seminary - responsible for forming men for the sacred ministry. It also served to remind him that perseverance will usually win out if it is right and what God wants, and that those in charge don't necessarily know what they're talking about!

After some time at the College of the Resurrection in Mirfield - which was a happy, formative and precious experience for him - and for many of us - with its monastic rhythm trying to instil in prospective parish clergy a healthy mix of prayer, study, manual work and recreation - he was ordained an Anglican deacon in Lichfield Cathedral, and spent a happy time at Tipton as curate to Fr Brian Whatmore, who would also become a priest of this diocese. He loved Tipton but, after a relatively short time, the Church of England decided to go its own way in its understanding of catholic order and the sacraments in the swirl of debate around the ordination of women priests. Many of us then realised that the ecumenical dream of unity with the See of Peter, and an adherence to the principles and vision of the Oxford Movement, had become untenable.

Many of the brethren at the time didn't know what to do or where to go - they dithered. Some dithered and dithered! But Fr Giles had a pretty analytical and decisive mind - and as he would often say when faced with difficulties, right up to his own recent terminal diagnosis, 'it is what it is' or 'we are where we are' depending on the circumstances. So where to now? Giles became the precursor, the first of many, to beat a path to Archbishop Maurice's door which led to him being received into the full-communication with the Catholic Church. He then came here as a seminarian - although back in those days he wouldn't honestly rate these as his happiest times - but it was what it was, and he persevered - and the rest, as we say, is history.

A sense and an appreciation of home was always an important part of his life - stemming, I suppose, from his solid home life built up by his mum and dad. And this sense of home, the importance of home, of creating a place of welcome - and fun - was always something important to him and coloured his priestly ministry. First with Monsignor Ryall at Newcastle, where he claimed to have learned of a hundred things you can do with a potato, and then on to Archbishop's House as secretary to Archbishop Maurice - which was certainly memorable, and the stories more so! Then there were his parishes - first of Worcester, with

the joy of having the Worcester County cricket ground within spitting distance - and then of Caversham, where he delighted in his first ever presbytery within walking distance of Waitrose.

Our gospel reading takes us to the wedding in Cana. It might seem a bit incongruous to hear about a wedding at a funeral. But St John tells us that this miracle of changing water into wine at the wedding feast was the first of the signs Jesus gave. Signs meet us, of course, where we are on the road, but they point us onward, they point us on to the destination – and for the Christian heart that is God’s eternal presence and the wedding feast of the Lamb. At the wedding Jesus took water, all that they had to offer- all they had left- and gave in return the richness of wine.

Literally thousands of times, as he offered Holy Mass, Fr Giles would have poured wine into the chalice, and then a drop of water and prayed quietly: *By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity* – that God in Christ became like us, so that, by his mercy and through his grace, we may become like him.

By offering himself for ordination, Giles offered the water of his humanity, so that divine grace might transform the hearts of people, and bring about the salvation of souls, through the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

Of course, none of this at Cana would have happened without Mary, our Lords Blessed Mother. For although she was just one guest among many at the wedding it didn’t stop her getting stuck in. She saw when there was a need – and she knew who to go to. ‘They have no wine’ she says to Jesus. ‘Do whatever he tells you’ she says to the servants.

I sometimes think, when hearing this gospel, of what must have been going through the minds of those servants who Mary spoke to. They must have been quivering with nerves when they went to the steward knowing that all they’d provided was water. Surely it would mean instant sacking – and maybe a good beating as well! But there must have been something about Mary’s words, the firmness of her conviction, her sure faith in her Son, that they listened to her guidance and did as he asked.....and trusted and hoped.

This figure of Mary, of Our Lady, is someone who featured strongly in Fr Giles’ story and life of faith. It was the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham that would be a place that drew him, and where that first call, that sense of vocation was nurtured and formed. Pilgrimage also to the shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes, especially with the Knights of Malta, which became such an important annual event that nourished him in his priestly life. Mary is, of course, patron of his former parish in Worcester, before having to leave there to go to the church of St Anne and shrine of Our Lady of Caversham, before ending up here in this place dedicated to the Mother of God.

As, in a moment or two, we bring to the altar the offerings that the Lord Jesus has commanded us to offer, and offer that sacrifice Fr Giles was privileged to offer as a priest of the Lord for the salvation of the living and the dead, we will seek for him the prayers of Blessed Mary in the words of the Ave Maris Stella – Hail Star of the Sea – that almost nautical prayer with its melody like waves of the sea - a prayer of encouragement and hope to the pilgrim in both good times and bad, in the storms of life as well as its joys, and as it is expressed in one translation:

Guard us through life’s dangers,
Never turn and leave us
May our hope find harbour
In the calm of Jesus.