

‘You will touch people’s lives in a very special and unique way’

Homily given by Fr. Stephen Myers, a silver jubilarian and parish priest of Holy Family, Dagenham, on the occasion of Fr. Hector Rick Fernandez’ first Mass.

Fr Rick has, during these two years, gone from sitting amongst you to sitting at my side as a deacon and now he’s in my seat! Do not get used to it. He is, however, sitting in the presiding seat and sitting there carries with it responsibility. Those people who mistake role with status have got it wrong. To be a Priest is to live up to that responsibility to live the Gospel and be part of the community.

In the Gospel reading today, we have this strange story of a woman with a haemorrhage placed in the midst of another story: that of the synagogue official’s daughter. Jesus is being pushed and pulled and this woman reached out and touched him. Now in Luke’s Gospel we are told that she touched him on the hem of his garment and the people who know their scriptures will know that this is the location of the tassels. The tassels were the mark of a person’s authority. For example they were used to sign contracts by pushing them into clay tablets. So while all these others were pushing, shouting, shoving, she has reached out in faith and sought the Lord for who he really was, sought out his authority. Each one of us is to reach out to the Lord in faith. A faith that can bring us wholeness. Yesterday at Fr Rick’s ordination, Bishop Alan spoke to the congregation and asked if there was a gap in their life? Was there something missing? That something may be the call they need to dedicate themselves to the Lord in vocation to Priesthood and religious life. It is the duty of any priest to support people’s faith. To nurture it, to develop it and to share it. Because as a priest, Fr Rick, you will touch people’s lives in a very special and unique way, sometimes in ways you first don’t realise.

When I was first ordained, 25 years ago, I was sent to supply for a couple of months in the parish of Hutton, which is near Brentwood. One day the doorbell went and when I opened the door, a woman was standing there and her first words to me were “Why do you hate me so much?” Truthfully, I nearly said “Hate you? I don’t even

know who you are". As it turned out the homily that I had given the previous Sunday had touched her so much she thought I was speaking directly at her! Fr Rick, you may not realise how much you can reach out to people just by being yourself, but you will find that you are with people for the whole of their journey. You will be there from the beginning to the end, the baptism to the funeral and all the journey and all the days in between, and for me that is the supreme privilege. The supreme privilege of being a priest is to walk the journey of faith with those that you come into contact, the privilege of seeing them develop, seeing them change, seeing them enriched, seeing them supported. It is a wonderful journey, a wonderful privilege, which is also exhausting, or can be so you will have to make sure you pace yourself.

In the Gospel we heard that the people were pressing around Jesus, trying to be close to see what would happen and yet they are not the ones that affected the Lord. It was the one that needed him most. You will find, Fr. Rick, as you go on that people will ask things of you, expect you to give them your full attention and will be seeking advice from you. There will be times when you are expected to know all the answers. The expectations will always be there and you will need to find time for yourself and find time to pray. Take your dog Oscar for a walk or something else that you find relaxing.

Your first duty, however, will always be to be true to the scriptures and the teaching of the Church. Your first call is to follow what the Lord has given and to give that to others. To be an example to people as they come with their joys and their sorrows. You see, you will find that no two days will be the same, when the doorbell goes or the phone rings you will not know often what or who is at the other end. Although when I was Fr John's curate in Grays, the doorbell used to ring outside my room. I was able to know before I opened the door if a person was going to ask me for money, because such people always left their finger on the bell for longer than normal. You will not always get those clues but with every encounter you will have the opportunity to give the Gospel meaning to those that you come across. So let scripture be the bedrock of all that you do, let the word of God permeate what you

say. In all things you should be true to yourself, true to the scriptures and true to your ministry and God will be with you.

I am convinced that people want the priest to be themselves, not to wear a façade, not to pretend to be someone else. It is our humanity that we share, our love that we share, ourselves that we share. It is, I can say after 25 years, a privilege and I hope that whatever path the journey takes your bedrock of prayer and scripture will see you through all. It can be challenging, it can be tiring, it can be joyful but remember it is a privilege to be a servant of God, serving others in all that we do and to share the sacraments with those that we meet.

May your priesthood be blessed, may the journey ahead be wonderful and when you come to your 25 years' celebration, I hope I'm still here. Amen