



Year IV, The Beauty of Discipleship

Encounter 1, “The Call to Holiness”

Presentation Notes

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I want to thank Archbishop Smith and Rita and Natalie for inviting me, in 25 short minutes, to try and offer a witness to three themes: commitment to the person of Jesus, obedience to him, and the way of the cross. I just want to say hello to a few people from the schools and the school boards who know me; I see friendly and familiar faces.

But listen, I’m here – it sounds self-indulgent! – to talk about myself. But that’s what a witness does, so I’m going to witness. The 4th of October, 1962. It was grey, my mum said. Drizzle, light rain, a sanguine affair. They had no money. I was baptized after Mass. A few people, not many. My mum looks back on that day. She said, “We prayed for a vocation.” She says their prayers were answered. I’m standing before you today in this beautiful basilica, and I’m going to tell you something: I call myself a disciple. How dare I do that, to call myself a disciple? What manner of courage? Look, when I was baptized, I was a baby, and all the things that Archbishop Smith said happened. The 4th of October, 1962, was a big day in my life; I just didn’t know it. Everything that Archbishop Smith said to you this evening I testify to, in the sense that it happened to me through grace. I just didn’t know it. In fact, I’m going to tell you something else. All those rich words of wisdom we just heard happened in my life completely unconsciously. I was a baby. I was a baby. I didn’t understand it.

For the first 15 or 20 years of my life I was immersed – and I hope this doesn’t sound radical when I say this to you -- but I was immersed in the Church. That’s what I knew. I knew the Church. I was an altar server. I used to serve. I tried to be in the right place at the right time. I tried to ring the bell at the right moment. I tried to walk properly. I tried to do all the things that you were supposed to do, and that’s the world I grew up in, a Catholic world. It was a good world. It was a world that loved me and that cherished me and cared for me, but it was Church. Forgive me, that’s what it was – Church. So I grew up with an impression of God as Church. It’s not a bad thing, but it meant that it was fairly serious, and not particularly about me.

I remember on one occasion the bishop came to our parish, and I was always struck by how formal everything became, as a little boy. It was the bishop's secretary's job to prepare us. As small altar servers we were lined up, and I remember the bishop's secretary was quite an awesome character, and he said to me, he said to all of us, "If the bishop asks you a question, answer honestly and succinctly." I remember thinking, what's "succinctly?" And the bishop was a good man, of course, and a man who cared about us, but I confess to being more frightened of him than anything else. As he came into the sacristy and walked past us, each of us clenched our fists under our albs, praying that he wouldn't ask us anything, for none of us knew what "succinctly" meant. And you know what he did, don't you? He stopped next to me. And he said, "Young man, what are you going to do with the rest of your life?" I was 8! I couldn't remember or understand the word "succinctly" but I did know "honestly," so I answered honestly. "My lord," I said, "I want to be a stunt man in a James Bond film." I didn't know that the question was about vocations. Do you know, he was a lovely man; I caught the edge of a smile.

When I came to do what we call A-levels, I was 18 and I needed to pass some exams to get into university and I made a bargain with God. I said, "Lord, if what they say about you is true, help me to pass these exams, help me to get to university, and you can have my life." You should be really careful! I got the grades I needed. I got the grades I needed and forgot about my prayer. Spent a year enjoying the material side of life, until one day it rang hollow for me. I recall, through a long story I won't tell you now, encountering as a young 19-year-old man my first encounter with genuine loneliness. I remember kneeling on the floor of my small flat, bed-sit, saying, "OK, I remember. Help me." When Archbishop Smith talked about the way of the cross, I was being taught at a very young age that enduring, suffering and encountering the Lord would not be an easy road but ultimately fulfilling.

I want to tell you one story that for me sums up what I feel I've been hearing this evening, but in my own life. Those who work in schools will be familiar with this, but it's my story. I found myself as a young teacher in a big and difficult school in Liverpool, in the north of England. The young people in this school came from a particularly deprived social background, and I'd been told that some of these young people were unteachable. I went to tell them, after they'd done some homework for me, I went to say to them, "You see, you can do this, believe!" But I'd forgotten their books. What a rubbish lesson that turned out to be: your work really matters but I've forgotten it. So I said to them something that changed my life -- I just didn't know it was going to. I said to them, "I'm going to be out of this room for two minutes. Any of you so much as breathes while I'm out of the room, you're dead." I ran down two flights of stairs and scooped up their books in the staff room and ran back to their classroom and did what many teachers do. I opened the door ajar and through the frosted glass, made out in the classroom absolute mayhem. I don't mean they were a bit lively in there. I mean it was out of control. People were chasing each other. Some had lit cigarettes. One boy was being held out of the

classroom by his ankles. In these moments, these are the times I get holy, when I don't know what to do. And I stood in that corridor and I said, "Lord I think you want me to be a teacher, but I don't know." I'm going to shout now, for anybody of a nervous disposition. I decided that I would either win this moment or I would get out, for I didn't want to be their friend. I'd seen how they treat their friends. So I kicked the door – Oomph! I mean, it really went. Then I went in there, "Now Look!" I said, the white showing on my teeth and around my eyes, a very aggressive posture, and pointed at them. "I trusted you!" I said -- and then realized that this wasn't my classroom. I froze. There was a teacher up at the board. I did a John Cleese. I went, "Sorry, wrong room!" I'd went just one flight of stairs too many. It was a big old school, and all the corridors looked the same.

I went and found my class. I sat in there. I sat down at my desk without giving them any attention. Then I said in a moment of vulnerability, you won't believe what I've just done. And one of them from the back said, "What did you do, sir?" And I told them the story I just told you. And they laughed. And then it went quiet. I didn't hear the Lord say this, but I know that this is what he was teaching me: "David, I don't want you to teach them *about* me, I want you to teach them *with* me. Let me into your teaching, and I'll open up their hearts. Don't do it by yourself, David, you'll make a fool of yourself. Rather, let me speak through you." And in those crazy, stupid moments, I was being introduced to the grace that your Archbishop spoke about earlier this evening. See, it's intimate. They didn't tell me that when they trained me to teach. I was teaching about him, I wasn't teaching with him. And then all that we've heard tonight came to life, in my life.

When my eldest son was born, I remember vividly being with Alison. It wasn't a profoundly emotional experience. I just remember this. I took the boy in my hands, he was only a few seconds old, and I gave him to his mother. She clasped him and then she grew weary from the pain, and I took him back and I wrapped him. And I looked at him and I remember this. I remember this immense sense of love for him, and I said to myself, "Why do I love this boy? He's done nothing to earn it," and yet every sinew of my body wanted to make the world better so that he could live in it. Then I had this thought: if God loves me the way I love that boy, I'm going to be all right.

My baptism has only become conscious in my life as an adult. As a child I was carried on the wings of others. Through stupid lessons of life in classrooms, and with my own encounter of love, I found a God who loves me.

So let me finish with what I'm learning about discipleship now, very briefly. God's not finished with me yet. I've still got a lot to learn. But here's seven things I've learned in these last few years:

1. Being a disciple hasn't made me any less interested in trivia. I love sports, I love art, I can still admire the beauty of others.
2. Being a disciple has not made me laugh less. In fact, in some ways I laugh more now than I used to, and my wife will often say to me, Don't get too serious. I didn't marry a serious man; I married a man who made me laugh." She said, "I didn't marry a fat man either."
3. Being a disciple has not freed me from doing stupid things, saying stupid things, making mistakes, acting like a spoiled child, from making a fool of myself. Neither has it freed me from occasional feelings of self-doubt and insecurity, anxiety, sometimes even jealousy.
4. Being a disciple hasn't stopped me from sometimes being irritated, even by the Church. Sometimes I can sit in my own parish and want to scream, and it's not because anybody else is bad, it's just that sometimes I feel it could be better than this.
5. Being a disciple has given me moments of genuine and immense joy I can't describe to you, except that I've wanted to take off my shoes and stand on the holy ground.
6. Being a disciple has given me a profound sense of meaning and purpose, and it helped me to say openly last weekend to my oldest son that if my life was taken from me now, I wouldn't feel cheated.
7. Lastly, being a disciple, I have to learn that the adventure isn't over yet. In fact, it's still beginning and it's keeping me young.

All this that's been given to me isn't because I'm any different from anybody else here tonight. It's just because God opened me up to it. I want to thank you for giving me 28 minutes of your life.

Thank you.