

The 54th anniversary of my priesting – Father John Beiers

Sermon for St. John's Halifax Street on the 54th Anniversary of my Ordination to Priesthood

Last Tuesday was St. Barnabas' Day the 11th of June, and I celebrated the 54th Anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood. Some of you have asked me whether I could speak in a sermon about where I been, and what had happened in my ministry, because you knew very little about me and my origins. So here goes, with a few remarks also about St. Barnabas.

My Early Life

I was born in 1937 in QLD, in an obscure village of about 12 houses called Mungar

Junction, near Maryborough. I had a very loving family, (mother, father and two brothers), and I had an idyllic childhood, roaming free on my bicycle on the bush roads. Every month we made the trip into Maryborough to go 'to church, and it was at the age of about 8 that I felt a calling to the priesthood.

Next came High School, and then University, when we moved to Brisbane. I gained a bachelor's degree in mining engineering, and did 5 years post-graduate work, before going to Broken Hill to work underground to obtain my Mine Manager's Certificate. After that I went to St Francis' College in Brisbane to study for the priesthood. There, on a College Mission to Charters Towers in NQ, I learned my first lesson – that all visiting, and mission work needs to be placed in

God's hands before you start. Though there may appear to be little result, God has used you to place one more piece or pieces of the jigsaw of faith in someone's life.

As I move from one part of my ministry to the next, I want to share with you some of the things that God taught me at each step.

I was ordained a priest on the 11th of June, 1970, St Barnabas' Day. Barnabas' actual name was Joseph, and he came from Cyprus, and there is quite a lot about him in the Acts of the Apostles. However, the apostles nicknamed him "Barnabas" meaning Son of Consolation, or the one who encourages, because of his kind and encouraging manner, his understanding heart, and willingness to take a back seat when someone greater than he came on the scene. As St Luke puts it, he was "good man, full of the Holy Spirit", You cannot give a person a greater compliment than that! I tried to model my ministry on his, react like he might have, and learn by experience. He was martyred at Salamis in AD 61.

Bundaberg

I was sent to Bundaberg in 1970, where the rector was supposed to have a problem with alcohol. But he had had a stroke earlier in his life, which left one side of his face drooping, as if drunk. So, rumours abounded but he was kind, holy, and prayerful, so I learned not to listen to rumours, or judge from outward appearances.

Once a woman in the parish mis-heard the words of a sermon I preached and refused all attempts of mine to set matters straight. It was crucial that this happen by the next Saturday night, The rector Wd me to pray and believe, On Saturday afternoon I met her and it was as if nothing had ever happened. Thus, I was taught the importance of persistent, believing prayer. I also learned how to handle 5 Masses on a Sunday in a big parish.

St George

I was sent to St. George (Q) in 1972, a grazing and cotton growing centre. Here I learned how to accept with gratitude the gifts of grateful parishioners, and not feel that I had to respond in kind. I was taught that there is a God-like innate compassion in folk who never come to church. My brother, aged 21, was killed in a car accident near Seymour, Victoria, and that weekday afternoon, the church was filled with people for Evensong. A man I did not know told me to be ready at 4.00am the next day, and he would drive me to Newcastle so that I could take the funeral without stress.

It was here that I came to understand the charismatic renewal, and was introduced to the church's ministry of healing, through seeing a woman healed of a brain tumour before my very eyes, in two days.

It was here that, after a disastrous flood which left dead sheep hung on barbed wire fences for miles and miles, that I feared for the faith of a young grazier, who had lost 9,000 sheep. He looked at me and said, "God has left me 1,000 sheep to start over again with." It was here that I was called to a stockman (whom I did not know) in Dirranbandi hospital, 80km away, on a wet and windy night, who wanted to see me before he died of cancer but was hanging on to life. I did not want to go, as the black soil roads were slippery like ice, and I had a very small car and no-one in their right mind would travel that night. But I went, unwillingly, got bogged, sat glumly in the car, and was pulled out by the only car to pass me that night. At the hospital door I took off my mud-caked boots and gave the emaciated man the last rites. As I blessed him, he folded his hands on his chest, and just stopped breathing. I went outside on to the verandah and cried, asking God for forgiveness. I learned then that no matter who we may be, God can still use an unwilling servant. This was to be the greatest lesson I was ever to be taught.

Cunnamulla

In 1975, as Head Brother of the Bush Brothers of St. Paul, I moved to Cunnamulla, where there were three brothers in the one house. There was a problem with the isolation of the rest of the Brothers whom I was expected to visit regularly. We prayed about it, and it seemed good to us and the HS that we should buy a plane do the job. So, in faith, I learned to fly, and we bought a Cessna 182. We did not actually have the money for the plane, but that year, our income increased through bequests by \$20,000, which was the exact price of the plane.

Here I realized that Ecumenism began in the Outback, Because of the lack of young men and women, marriages tend to take place between young people from local cattle stations. Thus, Anglicans and Roman Catholics tend to intermarry, so that there are many blended families. In times of crisis, your neighbours are the only people that stand between life and death, so denominational difference is not an issue in the Outback.

It was also my job to take the Brother at Quilpie to minister to the station people from Quilpie to Birdsville, and to the north and the south. Arrangements were made weeks in advance through the Flying Doctor Radio Network based at the Birdsville Hospital. We would visit three stations a day for 5 days. One for morning smoko, one for afternoon smoko, and one for a Community Mass and a bed for the night. This was not difficult, as the stations were often only about 150 km apart.

Charleville

In 1978 I moved to Charleville, where I had an episode with peritonitis, and moved to Dubbo as my new base. The Brotherhoods wound up in 1981, and I was asked by Archbishop Rayner to go to a Port Adelaide and make peace between the Catholics and Charismatics. That was not difficult, as

both groups believe strongly in sacraments, prayer, love and healing.

Port Adelaide

This was, at last, a settled ministry, with only three churches. It was here that I was taught the importance of not moving until there was unanimous agreement in the parish council. No one wins, no one loses.

It was here that I learned the joy of being part of every family, and the ministry of healing expanded to include exorcism of houses, of which there were many. It seemed as if I could spend the rest of my life here. But in 1988 I was asked to go to Normanton, on the Gulf of Carpentaria, as p.i.c. of a parish with 7 far-flung centres of worship, each 150 km distant from the next. One unfair attraction was that I would be the assistant pilot of the Diocesan plane. I was confused, so I asked the 6 of the most prayerful parishioners to pray about this and ask God what HE wanted. All but one reported back that I was to go to Carpentaria. The last one said he was unhappy with my request to pray about it.

Normanton

So in 1988 I went to Normanton. It was extraordinary. It was part of my job to fly round all the parishes from Normanton to Cairns, and all points north to pick up people from the parishes for Diocesan Council, Clergy Conferences, Retreats and Synods and fly them to Horn Island, the airport for Thursday Island. I had also to fly round all the islands in the Torres Strait collecting reps for these functions on Thursday Island. In my first year, I was also locum at Cooktown, which I visited by plane once a month.

So, I would spend on an average one week in Normanton parish, and the next week piloting the plane, a Cessna 210, a 6seater. I obtained my First Class Instrument Rating at the age of 51 , and so could fly in all weathers whenever required, in

relative safety. My most joyful moments, however, were when, after battling rainstorms for two hours down the QLD coast, in zero visibility, at night, I descended through the clouds to 300 feet, and could see the high intensity runway lights of Cairns spread out before me, welcoming me to land. Thanks be to God!

Aberfoyle Park and Clarendon

Finally, in 1992, I left for AB and Clarendon. That was a wonderful parish in a different way. It was new, having been started by Fr. Gene Bennett, and it had no traditions. All the parishioners were new, or converts from other denominations, so their outlook was fresh and willing to try new things. I had a ball! I retired in the year 2000, and it was then that I developed high blood pressure. Amazing! Since then I have done many locums, both in the Diocese of The Murray and Adelaide, and finally made my home with God's people St. John's. I still maintain a quiet ministry based at my retirement cottage for those seeking prayer, consolation and healing.

Thank you for celebrating with me my 54th anniversary of priesting. I have had a privileged life, and I thank God for all that He has taught me.