

26<sup>th</sup> Sunday (B)

26<sup>th</sup> September 2021

'Fr Philip — some of my faith story'

Num 11: *If only all the people of God were prophets!*

Ps 18: *from*

*presumption restrain your servant*

James 5: *your wealth is all rotting!*

Mk 9: 38–48: *if your hand ... foot ... eye should cause you to sin ...*

The Church teaches us that the sermon at a funeral Mass shouldn't be a *eulogy* about the deceased person, but a proclamation of the Word of God. And, even more, there's no way that the Sunday homily should be all about the priest himself! ... but ... just once, since I'm as new to Newman House as those of you who are freshers, I do intend, today, to say a bit about myself as your new Chaplain. Because I know, if I don't, I'll be asked many of the same questions time and time again in these early weeks.

I was born in London, and was baptized in St Mary's Clapham when I was 18 days old. My great-grandfather had just died, and so his funeral and my baptism took place within a couple of days of each other so my uncle, visiting London for the funeral, could be my godfather. Within a couple of months we had moved to Kent, and lived very near the [Carmelite shrine of Aylesford](#), dedicated to Our Lady of Mt Carmel and (the Carmelite saint) St Simon

Stock. That shrine played a very significant part in my young life — we would go there often on Sunday afternoons, come rain or shine, in season and out of season, to pray in the ancient Cloister chapel (part of the original mediaeval Carmelite shrine) and walking around the beautiful Rosary Way. In many respects I feel that this shrine, Aylesford, is the home of my priestly vocation. It's why I am keen to make that my first trip with you this term, (Sat 23<sup>rd</sup> October). I went to Catholic primary schools in Kent, one of which was newly opened in my parish — I attended from the very day it opened; and the church also was brand new, St Thomas More's in West Malling — it's where I made my first Confession, my first Holy Communion, and where I first began as an altar server; and where, the last spring that we lived there, I attended with my Dad the Easter Triduum for the very first time.

When I was 10 we left Kent and moved to the historic city of St Albans in Hertfordshire. It's my Mum's home town, and my parents have lived there ever since. The city is named after the proto-martyr of England, St

Alban, a soldier in the Roman army stationed there at the Roman town of Verulamium, and martyred in the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. for refusing to sacrifice to the pagan gods after sheltering a Christian priest and receiving Baptism from him. The site of his martyrdom is marked by the [great abbey church](#), a monastery from Saxon times right up to the Reformation, and still standing in part today as a beautiful Anglican cathedral. One can visit the prayerful place of the shrine, the very spot where it's been since mediaeval times, and where centuries of monks would have kept watch and cared for all the pilgrims coming to honour St Alban the martyr.

In St Albans I attended a Catholic secondary school, [Nicholas Breakspear](#), named after the only English Pope. He came from Abbots Langley, near St Albans, and for a short while was a postulant in the monastery of St Albans. He was an effective papal legate to Scandinavia, and then reigned as Pope Adrian IV for 5 years in the mid-12<sup>th</sup> c., when Henry II was on the throne of England. My secondary school years were happy years, and I was given such a great example of priestly life by the school chaplain Fr Tom, from

my home parish. Many years later he was the priest whom I asked to clothe me in my priestly vestments on the day I was ordained. I was blessed to know him at school. He has now gone to the Lord, 4 yrs ago — may he rest in peace.

I followed my schooling with a year's research in the oil industry, at BP in SW London, and then entered Cambridge University where I studied Natural Sciences, specializing in Physics. After my first degree I stayed on for a further 4 years to complete a PhD in the Cavendish Laboratory (Physics Dept.) in the area of radio-astronomy. I shall speak on other occasions about Faith & Science (talks starting 14<sup>th</sup> October), so I don't want to dwell on that here. I would rather say a bit about what University Chaplaincy meant to me in the 7 years I was studying for my degrees. I went to the [Catholic Chaplaincy in Cambridge](#) — named after St John Fisher, just as ours here is named after St John Henry Newman — on about day 2 of my 7 years! I guess that there were very few days in all those terms ahead that I didn't go to the Chaplaincy. Thinking about it, there were three areas that Fisher House

helped me with in my life as a Catholic ... and these are what I would most like to share with you today; these are things I would most like to bring to *our* Chaplaincy life here at Newman House in the terms and years ahead:

1. **Friendship.** The first is the fact that the Chaplaincy was for me a 'home from home.' No-one in my immediate family had ever been to university before; nor did I know anyone who was already there. The Chaplaincy (from day 2 of my university career) became my home, and a source of great friendships. I am still in touch with several friends whom I met in those very first days. One's a priest; one's a Carmelite sister; one's a paediatric psychologist: I met them all at Morning Prayer and Breakfast in those very first days; and the 7 years ahead gave me more and more wonderful Catholic friends, the vast majority of whom have become friends for life, and an enormous blessing in my life. One friend made in those days was a certain Stephen Wang!
2. **Formation.** The second area in which the Chaplaincy helped me enormously was the opportunity to learn more about my faith. Despite my 13 years at Catholic schools, and my many (happy) years as a practising Catholic in my home parishes, yet there were huge gaps in my knowledge. The

Chaplaincy gave me a chance to explore my Catholic faith on a level suitable for a university student. Talks by chaplains, visiting speakers, and long hours of conversations with my peers and friends, led to a wonderful new understanding of the depths, beauty, and truth of the Catholic faith. This was very important for me as I continued my academic life in the physics dept., so as to be confident in the absolute truth of Our Lord's Gospel message alongside, and in harmony with, the rigours of my astronomy research.

3. **Vocation.** Finally, I would say that a third crucial way in which my university Chaplaincy years helped me was in the area of vocation. The opportunity to spend good amounts of time working with the most wonderful religious sisters, brothers, and priests, starting with Fr Chris, the Benedictine monk who was my first university chaplain, gave me the chance to build on and test that initial calling to priesthood which I had had as a 10-yr old boy in Kent. Being with other students also devoutly exploring the possibility of a calling to marriage or religious life, helped set an atmosphere where it was normal and healthy to seek the Holy Spirit's guidance in one's life plans, and helped me enormously finally make that commitment to offer myself for the priesthood.

There's lots more I could say — lots more to unpack, as I accompany you and encourage you all in your university life; but I urge you to use this Chaplaincy as much as possible in your years at university — for making friends; for deepening the understanding of your faith, and its expression in prayer and liturgy; and for exploring what God is calling you to in life, the personal vocation that He has destined for you. These are *precious* years — please God, happy and fulfilling years — and important years as you allow the Lord to form you as His fervent disciples.

Let's end with a line from that first reading, Moses rejoicing in the charismatic gifts of God: *If only the whole people of the Lord were prophets and the Lord gave His Spirit to them all!* The Lord wants you to receive the Spirit here in the Church — here at Newman House — to make you Spirit-filled prophets, disciples and evangelists. Give yourself generously to Him in this year ahead; use all the opportunities here for friendship, faith formation, vocational discernment, and allow the Spirit to flood you with His love, His courage, His missionary outreach. *If only the*

*whole people of the Lord were prophets and the Lord gave His Spirit to them all!* I pray that Newman House will give that to you: God's blessed, powerful, compassionate Spirit, setting you up for life as a fervent disciple of Our Lord Jesus.