

**SILVER JUBILEE TO THE SACRED PRIESTHOOD OF FR. STEPHEN POWERS
SERMON PREACHED BY FR. TONY NOBLE, SSC
TUESDAY, DECEMBER 18th, 2007
ST. BRIDES CHURCH, VIRGINIA BEACH**

Hebrews 5:6 "Thou art a priest forever, after the order of Melchisedech."

These words, quoting Psalm 110:4, are on many cards given to priests when they are ordained. It is a prophecy of dignity - and a promise of hard labor from him who said: *"Ask the Lord of the harvest, to send laborers into his harvest"*. It is a text so appropriate on the day of Ordination. How much more appropriate, therefore, when we come to celebrate the Silver Jubilee today of our dear friend - Fr. Stephen.

Fr. Stephen - as your mind goes back to that wonderful day when you were consecrated a priest forever, no doubt you are thinking what a great God we serve who has allowed you the dignity of his Sacred Priesthood for 25 years. What memories must flash before you of the joys of the priestly ministry, and of the sorrows, too! Of the blessings you have received and given. And of your own failings and negligence's. Above all, you will be reflecting on the places where you have been and the people who have been part of your life. I count it a privilege to have been part of that life for these past five years.

I first met Fr. Stephen in 2002. He was stationed then with the US Navy in San Diego, and I was the Rector of Saint Mark's, Fitzroy in Melbourne, Australia. We met through the Society of the Holy Cross - commonly known as SSC - the Anglican Priests' society to which we both belong. At that time I was the Master of the Australian Province of the Society. Because of my position I was invited to be the guest preacher at the American Synod of the Society, which was being held in San Diego in October 2002.

Fr. Stephen - no doubt because of his excellent hospitality qualifications - had been appointed to liaise with the visiting brethren about our flights and arrivals. So we communicated by email. Although Fr. Stephen was in the US Navy, he had never visited Australia. But his years in the Navy had taught him a lot about Australia culture. So in confirming my arrival and replying, he said: *"I'll make sure we have lots of Fosters here for you!!"* And he did.

That SSC Synod had two wonderful outcomes for me. Firstly, an enduring friendship with this fine priest; and secondly, a subsequent invitation to become the Rector of All Saints', San Diego. A year later, having answered the call to All Saints' Church, I arrived in San Diego to be the Rector - and Fr Stephen was there to support me.

I was here for his Induction as Rector of St. Bride's just three years ago - and now it is my privilege to preach at this joyous celebration. The invitation came about with an agreement. On the feast of the Ascension in May I celebrated my 60th birthday, and I invited Fr. Stephen to come and be the guest preacher for the occasion. He said he would agree if I would return the favor and preach for this great occasion for him. I said to my congregation that I think May in San Diego was a better deal than December in Virginia!

But of course nothing was going to keep me away, not even the threat of snow in Chicago.

In actual fact my flight here was delayed some 90 minutes because of the weather. When I got to Chicago many people on my flight from San Diego had missed their flights and had to be rebooked. As I was waiting at my gate to board the flight to Norfolk Airport there was a long line next to me of people from cancelled flights waiting to be rebooked.

This is probably of course, the worst week for weather and flight delays and cancellations. So, predictably, an angry passenger pushed his way to the front of that line and slapped his ticket down on the counter, and said: *"I have to be on that flight, and I have to be in first class"*. The agent very calmly stated: *"I'm sorry sir, I'll be happy to help you - but I've got to help these people first. Then I'm sure we can work something out"*. ☺

The passenger was not impressed, saying in a loud voice: *"Do you know who I am?"* Without hesitating, the agent smiled, grabbed her PA microphone and announced to the whole airport: *"May I have your attention, please. Your attention, please. We have a passenger at gate 14 who does not know who he is. If anyone can help him find out his identity, please come to gate 14 immediately"*.

But of course, unlike the irate passenger - Fr. Stephen does know his identity. He knows who he is. He knows is a priest of the Most High God. The readings chosen for tonight tell us more about being a priest of the Most High God.

Isaiah 6:8, *"And I heard the voice of the Lord saying 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' then I said, 'Here am I, send me!'"*.

Many years ago, Fr. Stephen heard the voice of the Lord. At first he could not believe it, conscious of his own unworthiness. Like all priests worthy of the call, he wondered if it could be possible for him to stand before God for his people, and to stand before his people for God. But when he had his eyes fixed on our crucified Lord, he knew that Jesus had chosen him because he **was** unworthy. So, like Isaiah, he responded: *"Here I am, send me!"*

Like another great figure in the Old Testament, the young David. When he was offered the hallowed sword by Ahimilech the priest, David said: *"There is nothing like that. Give it to me"*.

The willingness of a man to heed God's call in humility and joy is the secret to the vocation - for it is no mere job or second career. The writer to the Hebrews makes that quite clear. The priest stands *in persona Christi* - words that the Church uses to remind us that at the altar in the chasuble is not Fr. Stephen Powers, but Jesus himself - our great High Priest.

The Sacred Priesthood of Christ's Holy Catholic Church is a profound mystery by which the Lord takes men and makes them represent himself. In which men represent him who is our Great High Priest. Christian priests are the real deal! They are priests for ever after the order of Melchisedech. And just as Melchisedech offered sacrifices to God Most High, so the priests of the New Covenant offer the sacrifice of Jesus at the altar of Christian temples. Only a priest can say: *"This is my body"*, because only a priest of Jesus Christ can say that.

Through the mystery of the priesthood all of us are enabled to enter into the mystery of the Eucharist and to be the body of Christ on earth.

Jesus comes to us in the Blessed Sacrament, because he has already come in Ordination to the priest. Just as we take Christ with us when we leave from the altar, so the priest is a walking sacrament - showing us and giving us Jesus. But only because Jesus is the Great High Priest.

Fr. Stephen, how great are those words *"Thou art a priest forever, after the order of Melchisedech"*.

You are the real deal - how wonderful that you know who you are!