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Homily at Eucharist
Conference of Deans and Senior Priests
21 October 2008

Eph 2:11-22 – Once far off ... Christ our peace ... citizens with the saints; cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined and grows – we, a spiritual dwelling place for God
Ps 85:8-13

Lk 12:35-38 – Be alert – like slaves awaiting their master's return from a wedding

May I speak in the name of God – and may we all, with the Psalmist, hear the Lord God's word of peace to his faithful ones whose hearts are turned to him.

This little story about slaves being alert for their master's return is in stark contrast to another little story about slaves that Luke tells in chapter 17:7-10.

In the latter – which rarely appears in the lectionary – he speaks of the servant / master relationship as his hearers, the apostles, would have expected:

Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once, and take your place at the table?' Would you not rather say to him 'Prepare my supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'

Well, that would be the norm – and to a considerable degree the way we conduct our lives as Christians, as Christian leaders, must be to meet the norms. We must be diligent in living up to our ordination promises, in fulfilling the requirements of the Offices, and ensuring that our responsibilities within our appointments are met.

But this is the background which we need to bear in mind as we hear today's gospel passage. Jesus says that servants should be alert for their master's return – well, this is what is expected of them. But then, the master reappears, late from a wedding party – and now Jesus turns expectations upside down by saying that the master will not be as in the later Lucan story, expecting his servants to see to his needs. Rather, even if it is the middle of the night, he will put the comfort of his servants first,

and will serve them dinner – instead of them getting his left overs only after he has eaten and gone to bed!

So, we need to be on our toes, diligent – because that is our duty.

But, far, far more than this, Jesus wants us to be alert to his coming, alert to encountering him unexpectedly at any moment of the day, in any and every circumstance of our lives – because when we recognise his presence, it will be as wonderful as this midnight feast for the tired and hungry.

This is the joy of the service that is ‘perfect freedom’. This is why being a priest, a dean, an archbishop, is far more than a job.

Even a few months after arriving at Bishops court, I am finding that there is a great deal of routine management, and many other tasks that may not feel very spiritual. But I need to guard against falling into the complacency of just ‘doing my job’ whenever these cross my desk.

Rather, I need to maintain that alert expectation of our reading – the expectation that comes from being the sort of theologian of which I spoke earlier – always on the look-out for the finger-prints of God the Father, the presence of the incarnate Christ, the taste of the fruits of the Spirit, in any and every moment of the day – and so to be able to respond to their leading.

In this way we find that we are refreshed and resourced – sat down and fed – by our master, for the life of service to which he calls us.

Amen