Allocution Investiture 31/10/25 Holy Trinity Kew

Before I start the Allocution I wish to pay tribute to the Godly man who did this before me: Bp John Parkes who has gone to God. He was a big man in all senses of that description. I feel incredibly honoured to take on his role in the Priory of Victoria and know these are very big shoes to fill, and will do my upmost to fulfil this calling as Conventual Chaplain. Vale John Parkes.

What came to mind when considering today was a scene from Monty Python's *Life of Brian*:

what have the Romans ever done for us?
The aqueduct.
What? ...they, they gave us the aqueduct...

Yes, they did give us that, that's true
And sanitation Yes, that too
The aqueduct I'll grant is one
thing the Romans may have done
And the roads, now they're all new
And the great wines too

Well, apart from the wines and fermentation,
And the canals for navigation
Public health for all the nation
Apart from those, which are a plus,
what have the Romans ever done for us? (1)

And I thought maybe we are thinking the same about the Sovereign Order of St John what have they ever done for us?

Hospitals, Hospices.
What? .....
they, they gave us hospices and hospitals…..

Yes, they did give us that, that's true
And sanitation with healthy diets that too
Hospitals, Hospices I'll grant is one
thing the Knights may have done
And the defence of western christendom
And great wines too

Well apart from the wines and fortified fermentation
Hospitals, Hospices and the defence of western christendom,
sanitation and healthy diets and alms for the poor
Apart from those, which are a plus
What have the Knights of St John ever done for us?…..

Today we invest and celebrate the investiture of three Dames and three Knights into the Sovereign Order of St John Knights Hospitaller an ancient order going back to 1048 which has been involved

in aiding the sick and the poor ever since. A convent was built in Jerusalem which became a Benedictine Monastery dedicated to St John the Baptist and where the first Hospice was built and the rest is history…

St John the Baptist the namesake of our Order is among very few that have two feast days, where the Order celebrates his birth festival day on June 24th - which is better I guess than his beheading feast on the 29th August! The unkempt man we all envision as an adult was once a child, wrapped like Jesus would be, in baby clothes rather than camel skin. What he became, looks like the sort of holy person we might meet in the Sub Continent today. What he was at birth was someone who looked a good deal like you and me.

When a baby is brought to the font to be named and baptised, perhaps we contemplate for a moment what she or he may grow up to be. Perhaps this helpless baby may be a bishop or a priest or deacon, a leader, a teacher, a doctor, a diplomat, a Knight or Dame or even a politician!

The story of John's birth is a bit more dramatic than regular baptism. His father, Zachariah, a priest of the temple in Jerusalem, is told by God's Messenger Gabriel, that his aged wife, Elizabeth, is to give birth. How old Elizabeth was we don't know. Time was measured a good deal less precisely in those days, and a person was counted as aged in their forties. Elizabeth, the Blessed Virgin Mary's cousin, had reached the age when it was not normal for women to have children. Zachariah the priest is skeptical. Don't think it is just we moderns who have our doubts.

The Messenger angel Gabriel deals with Zachariah's doubts by making it impossible for him to speak, rather like St. Paul after he met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. Perhaps the shock of the encounter gave the old priest a mild stroke. Who knows?

In the Gospel tonight we discover what happens when the child is born. It was common then, as it is now, for children to be named after a parent. Indeed in some families it is necessary to place a number after the child's name, rather like a monarch, to denote how many have gone before. It was therefore expected that the baby would be given his father's name, Zachariah Junior. Instead, the old priest defies tradition and writes that the child's name shall be John, as if to say that this child is special and is chosen by God for a special purpose or mission.

It is a great pity that today the suggestion that a baby may grow up to be a priest is greeted in some quarters with the sort of shock that might be provoked if it were contemplated that the baby might become a road digger. There was a time when a family thought it an enormous honour to have a child called to a vocation as a priest.

And if not a priest, a Christian whose life is dedicated to God and to God's Church, to tell the Good News and point to Jesus, just as John one day would point and exclaim, "Behold the Lamb of God. That calling is a very big part of being a Knight or Dame in the Sovereign Order of St John and our patron saint St John gives us the perfect model to form our lives around.

The birth of John the Baptist is all about dedication to the service of God as the overriding narrative of a life. It reminds us that the calling to be a Christian Knight or Dame is a great calling and a great honour and is not about having a religious/charitable hobby among all the other hobbies of life, down the list from work and family, and competing with time spent with other organisations.

The calling of a Knight or Dame defines who we are, whose we are and every other part of life. As we will shortly hear and witness in the vows enunciated: *Upon the true faith of a Christian, may God witness that I hereby vow and dedicate myself as a servant of Christ and humanity, especially the poor and the sick, the first qualification of a true Knight or Dame.*

John the Baptist, as a priest's son, was a priest himself. The office was hereditary. But we too, through our baptisms, are described in the New Testament as "priests for God." As Knights and Dames we are given an important commission. We stand as intercessors between God and the human race to assist the poor and the sick in this troubled and divided world. Like John, in the context of home, family, friends, work, and recreation, we must pattern a 'turned about' life and way of living, and call those we meet to newness of life through our example, deeds and words.

St John, as an adult, thundered "Repent!" turn around, walk in a new way. He was called to this message. So are we called and reminded tonight.

Fr Robert Newton

1) Monty Python: *The Life of Brian* screenplay 1979