

Sunday 21st December 2025

St Thomas, Father James Reeves and Father Michael Fox.

- Basic script as preached by Rev'd Fr Jeffrey Berger, at St Peter's by the Lake, Paynesville.
- Occasional editorial alterations were made for publication.
- *Ad lib*, at the beginning of the sermon, omitted.
- The *ad lib* acknowledged the Bondi Terrorist situation, and a promise not to sing in the sermon, a point made and received in good grace by the regular preachers within the Parish (!)

Today, we have two significant events to celebrate.

Firstly, remembering and giving thanks for the life, work and witness of St Thomas, Apostle and Martyr, for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, to celebrate the ordination to the priesthood of Father Michael Fox in 1959 and Father James Reeves in 1965.

So, we celebrate with them today 66 and 60 years of priestly ministry- 126 years in all (think of worldwide ministry).

Firstly St Thomas.

After Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, Thomas was the next to acknowledge his divinity. When Jesus appeared to His disciples in the upper room and showed Thomas the wounds of the crucifixion and challenged him to believe, Thomas replied with "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28)

It is impossible to estimate the millions who were brought to the same confession because of Thomas following the commandment of Christ to "go and make disciples of all nations. But the churches Thomas founded in India have kept Christianity alive there to the present day.

(Note that the Anglican Church of Australia, when it was first established, came under the initial Jurisdiction of the Anglican Diocese of Calcutta, in India.

Initially, though, Thomas was an avid believer, "Let us all go with the Teacher, so that we may (all) die with Him (John 11:16)

But in reality, the crucifixion shook Thomas to the very core of his being, and we can understand his doubt when he was confronted with the impossible. "Unless I see.....I will not believe" (John 20:24).

The doubt of Thomas stands in the record so that we may be able to face our own doubts. Even the most radical doubt is not a cause for ongoing despair. Doubt, as for Thomas, does have its time and place. In the psychological sense, some sceptical doubt in many situations is healthy and helpful. In the present time, and particularly in the way things have been just recently (the Bondi massacre, for example), not even the clergy can escape it. But we clergy, along with you, have a catchcry we can use, every day, to push back against the doubt when, as New Testament scholar Karl Barth, we pray, millions of us around the world each day, "Your Kingdom come. The words of Lady Julian of Norwich are also relevant here: "Christ did not say 'thou shalt not be tempted, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be afflicted' but he did say 'Thou shalt not be overcome'.

Thomas was martyred by being speared to death, and was initially buried, it is believed, at Mylapore, near Madras in India. An ancient stone cross still marks this burial site. His remains were subsequently moved to Edessa in 384 AD.

Thomas then, remains an encourager, even in the face of great adversity.

And secondly, we think about the priestly ministry of Father James Reeves, Jim, and Father Michael Fox.

(share my two stories about Michael and Jim)

The psalmist tells us (Psalm 110:4) "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek was an ancient priest-king mentioned in Genesis 14, who blessed Abraham. He is best known known for his righteousness and kingship. The unknown writer of the letter to the Hebrews sees this as a significant biblical prophecy fulfilled in Jesus Christ, signifying His unique, eternal priesthood as both King and great High Priest, and making Him the ultimate intercessor and guarantor of a better covenant for believers (Hebrews 1:1-3).

The rite of ordination marks and sets apart in a unique way, a man or woman as part of the continuity of this priesthood, in various forms, down through the millennia. It is quite a delightful image. The priesthood, St John Vianney tells us, is the love at the heart of Jesus.

"You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek"

And priesthood, especially in the West and in this day and age, is expressed in a number of different ways. (give some examples, finish with me). The late Rev'd John Richardson said that "once a person is ordained, it does not go away, and there is no off switch".

An Anglican Bishop, with a rather wicked sense of humour was asked about the role of clergy generally in the present day. He replied "clergy are like manure, spread about they can cause some good, when focused in a group, such as at a conference or a synod, they can stink to high heaven.

Maybe it's good that there are only five of us in the parish here!

I hope the variety of priesthood and ministry will be illustrated, albeit briefly and I hope not too inaccurately, in what follows, in the ministries of Jim and Michael.

James William Reeves, Jim, trained at St Colomb's Hall in Wangaratta, where he received his Licentiate of Theology, and was made a Deacon in 1964 and priested in 1965, by the then Bishop of Wangaratta, Theodore Bruce McCall.

Jim served two curacies. The first at St Mary's Redcliffe over 1965-1966 and then at St Augustine's Shepparton over 1967-1968. He was then appointed Rector of Violet Town / Dookie between 1969-1971, followed by St Paul's Myrtleford from 1971-1974. Between 1974 and 1975 Jim took a period of leave from active ministry. And then in 1975-76 returned to active ministry as priest in charge of the parish of Corryong; and as Rector of St Stephen's Rutherglen between 1976 and 1979. Over the period 1977 to 1981 he also held the position of Bishops Chaplain to Bishop Max Thomas. He was rector of Holy Trinity Nathalia between 1979-1981. Jim then moved to the Diocese of North Queensland where he was assistant priest in the parish of Heatley between 1983 and 1984, returning to Wangaratta to

become priest in charge of the parish of Marysville in 1984. In 1985 Jim moved to the Diocese of Gippsland, to take up the position of chaplain to Wron Wron prison between 1985 and 1989. He was then rector of Yarram between 1985 and 1989, followed by Heyfield from 1989 to 1995, during which time he also served as chaplain to Sale prison between 1990-1993. During the period 1990-1995 Jim was rural dean of the Sale Deanery before becoming rector of St Georges Wonthaggi between 1995 and 1997. Jim returned to Wangaratta diocese to rector of the parish of Nagambie in 1997; and finally retired from full time ministry in 1999, gaining permission to officiate in both Wangaratta and Gippsland dioceses.

And of course, we know that Jim has been of great assistance here in the parish of St Peter's (and in other parishes), very ably assisted by Del, during the time he has held his PTO.

Jim was what was called in previous days a country parson, serving the church in rural Victoria as assistant curate, priest in charge, rector, chaplain, rural dean. And through all this, I might add, ably assisted by Margaret his first wife and then later by Del, who we all know and love. Jim overcame a difficult early life to take up a vocation from God to priesthood. A vocation that we are very glad indeed that he did. Jim wanted me to highlight the fact that, even though there were the inevitable ups and downs of personal and priestly life, the main gift for him was the joy of serving in his role of priest. Thank you, Jim, for all that you have given to the church and to us.

Father Michael Fox was made a deacon at Durham Cathedral in 1958; and ordained a priest, also at Durham in 1959, having been an ordinand at the college of the Resurrection at Mirfield. Prior to ordination, Michael had obtained a Bachelor of Arts and a Master of Arts from Oxford University. He was indeed fortunate to be lectured by both JRR Tolkien and C S Lewis. Later in life, in 2006, he gained a Masters of Divinity degree from the University of Divinity while serving as assistant priest at St Pauls Cathedral in Melbourne. He had also served in the British Army as a lieutenant, during which time he served for two years in Libya.

Over the period of his priestly ministry Michael has worked in ten parishes, in seven different countries. They being, apart from the United Kingdom, Tanzania, Zambia, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Greece and Australia. He served as assistant priest at Arusha and St Andrews Dar-es-Salaam in Northern Tanzania. He organized and built the shanty town church of all saints Chaissa; and served for a period as an assistant priest at Lusaka cathedral. He served under the legendary Australian Missionary Bishop Alfred Stanway in what was then Tanganyika. I knew Alf when he was assistant principle at Ridley College during my brief stay there. I respected him greatly, He created, virtually out of nothing and single handedly, three African Dioceses. And as a matter of interest, he has family ties in this area and is buried her in Paynesville cemetery, along with his wife Marjory.

Along with priestly ministry Michael combined other careers as well, over time. Including teaching for the British Overseas Service, working as a school inspector in Zambia, a Flight line instructor for the

Royal Saudi Air Force in Dhahran Saudi Arabia, a Lecturer at both the petroleum university in Iran, and Benghazi University in Libya, and as a teacher in Adult education at Footscray TAFE, here in Australia.

A highlight in Michael's ministry was when he was living in Greece in 1984, convening the World Council of Churches seminar on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry in Athens. The other Greek highlight was meeting Eleanor in 1984; and aren't we glad that he did.

Michael and Eleanor came to Australia in 1986, and he became a member of St Peter's parish here in 2012.

Here in Australia, between 2004 and 2012, he was an approved member of an ecumenical group that regularly visited refugees at the Melbourne Detention Centre.

Here in East Gippsland, he was the co-founder of the East Gippsland Asylum Seekers Support Group EGASS.

Over and above this, Michael is an accomplished artist, produced five plays while in Lusaka and has written four books.

Michael sums his priesthood up by simply saying that it has centred on "Meeting, learning about and serving people".

He is an Anglican, but is also a member of the Society of Friends, the Quakers.

Able supported by Eleanor, Michael has contributed significantly in his priestly ministry over the decades. We give him most grateful and heartfelt thanks for that.

We have some real priestly talent in this ministry. I apologise in advance to these men. I would like you all to stand, while Jim, Michael, Del, and Eleanor remain seated; and thank them and their partners heartily for their rich and varied priestly ministry with acclamation.

So today we remember Thomas, Jim and Michael; and in this small way, give thanks for their rich and fulfilling priestly ministries.

The Lord be with you.