

## Chrism Mass 2019

Isaiah 61.1-9; Ps 23; James 5.13-16a; Luke 4.16-21

Dear fellow clergy and readers, dear brothers and sisters:

It is with great joy that we have come to celebrate this Chrism Mass together and renew our commitment to be the body of Christ in this diocese. Being a priest, a deacon, a reader in the Church of God can be a lonely business. And believe it or not, it is a pretty lonely business also for a bishop. So it is such a blessing to gather together today as a visible sign of our support and care for each other within Christ's Body. I extend a personal word of thanks to each of you for your collegiality and collaboration with me and Bishop Robert and with one another.

Personally I find it so moving when I read and reflect on the words of our Lord to his disciples when he says, "I call you friends". It is important to remember that we gather as *friends*, friends of each other, and more importantly, friends of Our Lord. When we renew the vows of our ministry we recall that we are intimately linked with each other and with our Lord – we are the *friends* of Jesus, and we share in his own life-giving and sacrificial ministry, as beloved friends.

As you all know the Mass of Chrism has a practical purpose: to bless the Oil of Catechumens, the Oil of the Sick, and to consecrate the Sacred Chrism. These sacred oils will be used by me and the priests during the celebrations of certain sacraments throughout this coming year. The historic reason to hold this Eucharist in an already busy Holy Week is to ensure that we have sufficient fresh oil for the sacraments of initiation which we customarily celebrate in Eastertide.

But also today the ministers of the Church renew their sacred promises made when they were ordained deacon, priest or bishop, or when they were admitted to the office of Reader. We pledge before each other that we choose to remain faithful to these promises, for some of us made a long time ago. But this is not a service only for "ministers". We need the prayers of the ordinary lay members of the Church, that we remain faithful, despite all the challenges of ministry in today's Church.

Ministry is always a challenge. In the Diocese in Europe we are challenged by the size of the Diocese and the distances between our communities. We are challenged by rapid and uncertain changes in our beloved Europe. We are challenged by factors in our congregations, by age, by health, by personal limitations, by buildings. We are challenged by strategies and plans and by the Church of England's rather anxious urgency to be engaged in programmes of renewal and reform. And in the face of this we are challenged by limited resources.

Of course we can be *too worried* about this resource question. We know that the Church *never* has all the resources it needs to fulfil our ministry. And that is not a bad thing at all, for it reminds us of a fundamental truth: that we are to depend on the Lord! Remember that in this great work of being bearers of good news in the world, evangelisation, is at the end of the day the work of God the Holy Spirit. Despite the Church of England's tendency to reduce evangelisation to a question of numbers, we should not be overly concerned about how to "catch fish". Remember: Our work as bishops, priests, deacons, lay ministers, is to set out and cast wide the nets. *It is the Lord who catches the fish!* As we hurry about trying to make things happen in our chaplaincies and in our diocese it is easy to forget as bishops, priests, deacons, and lay ministers, that *faithfulness* is what God asks of us. Faithfulness is our duty and calling. Now fruitfulness is another thing, but fruitfulness is *the work of the Holy Spirit!*

Dear friends, let us never forget that in the end it is the mission of God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit that we care for. We are only recipients of grace and the tools through which God wants to be present; in the end it's God who touches the hearts of people; it is God who

converts hearts and opens eyes and ears. When we forget this we can be in danger of forgetting what our place is and what we are for.

The readings today, my friends, give us encouragement as we ponder our place, our purpose as ministers.

Isaiah in the first reading was announcing a message of hope to God's people who were in a time of exile. They were feeling lost in the wake of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. (*Added in Rome – likely the way the people of Paris are feeling today, with the destruction of Notre Dame*). All the ritual and temple-based worship and cult that they were used to were now history. It is rather like us who might lament that the days are gone when the Church could count on being respected, its leaders heard, and its values understood. We are living in secular times, and are ministers in a world which does not offer us security, status and deference. So we hear the Prophet Isaiah calling the people to a *new way* of worship and witness. They are to be 'priests of the Lord and 'ministers of God', but not in the way of the past, when the temple in all its power and its glory stood at the heart of society and the life of the people of Israel. The new way was to exercise their priesthood and ministry by being attentive to the poor, the vulnerable and the broken.

In the Gospel Jesus reads this message of Isaiah and then preaches the shortest sermon ever: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing". He turns the message of Isaiah into a kind of personal manifesto for his own ministry. So we see how he proclaims and defends the dignity of the least, befriending and socialising with tax collectors, sinners and prostitutes; we see him challenging attitudes of prejudice and exclusion; we see him breaking social taboos and always expanding the boundaries of human love, acceptance and friendship. This is the way the world will see the kingdom of God taking root here on earth.

These are the ways, dear friends, that we are faithful ministers of Christ: in the ways we lead our communities to live, minister and witness to this liberating Gospel. The way of ministry patterned after Christ is to be alongside the poor, to be present at the periphery and margins. Our Church is not an enclosed temple only accessible to the virtuous, the privileged, and the pure. It is a community which is marked by radical love, inclusiveness, service to the weary and downtrodden. There is no place for leadership in this community of Jesus which is about power, only leadership of humble and faithful service.

So my friends, what are we to make about the anxious desire in the Church for numerical growth, as a sign of missiological fruitfulness? It seems that ever since I have been ordained there has been some programme or other, either in Canada where I first served, or in the Church of England, to increase our numbers, to grow the Church. Again, evangelisation seeming to be simply a word which means increasing bums on seats.

Well, this has caused me to reflect more and more as to whether the early Christians believed that they would one day be a multitude! It seems to me that the images in the New Testament of the Church and of the faithful are rather more modest in scope. The images are of salt, yeast and leaven. I loved it when Pope Francis said he had never seen a pizzamaker who took half a kilo of yeast and only a teaspoon of flour to make a pizza! It has to be the opposite proportion. It seems to me that we need to pay more attention to the deep tradition in the scriptures where the images are about being leaven in society, more than with being the majority.

And then to link this with our readings today: Can our minority position as communities of Christians become a gift to the world, so that we can be more attentive, more accepting, more open to those who are themselves are fragile and in minority situations? Is God pointing us in a direction that our communities can be real places of blessing for all who are surrounding us in this hurting world, with their weaknesses, fragilities, and insecurities?

And let us remember that the yeast rising in a lump of dough is not an instant loud, earth-shattering explosion, but a gentle, warm process, that cannot really be hurried along! The business of turning this world into the Kingdom of God, that kingdom proclaimed by Isaiah and announced by Jesus, seems to involve gradual change rather than rapid transformation. The life of grace is gentle and gradual, and so here is the link to what we celebrate today and on Maundy Thursday: the gradual, sometimes barely perceptible transformation which occurs in the sacraments, and especially in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The action of grace, Eucharistic grace, is marked by patience, faith, prayerful waiting, rather than rapid action and deployment of great material resources. I wonder whether this is why some of the newer forms of Church life that are being experimented with under the label of “fresh expressions” are rather distrustful of the Eucharist – for the Eucharist is about the sense of the gradual, the barely perceptible transformation brought about by God’s grace.

Dear sisters and brothers: today we reaffirm before God that we are called by his Son to be leaven and salt, gentle agents giving life and flavour around us. Let us commit ourselves to be the Church that reaches out to strength the weak, to heal the broken-hearted, to lift up the fallen and to invite all to the loving arms of God. Even when we feel we are in tough times, let us remember that God’s grace is still offered in the oils of baptism, healing and consecration. In the midst of times of uncertainty and even despair, let us recall that God’s new and glorious recreation is mysteriously brought about in us as we celebrate the Eucharist, as we become what we are: the Body of Christ. And in this Holy Week, when we commemorate the Passion of Our Lord, we know that new birth and new life only comes when we are prepared to empty ourselves, indeed even die to the old ways. Indeed our Gospel is the Paschal mystery of dying and then rising, after the pattern of our Lord himself.

Friends, may we be like the prophet Isaiah for our people in their contemporary exile. May we be strengthened to walk the journey of faith with those who feel lost, may we understand more and more what it is to be at the margin, and to be fragile, and may we come alongside all those who in this world are at the edge and let us then share with them the message of hope, show them signs of God’s love, and walk with them hand in hand in the direction of the kingdom.