

## Sermon for the Mass of the Oils 1999

Because of the years I spent as a University Chaplain, on behalf of the Bishops' Conference, I now find myself acting as a sort of 'godfather' to the Conference of Chaplains in Higher Education. One of my tasks is to attend their annual conference, which was where I was at the beginning of last week.

The process of that conference is still in my mind. One of the exercises we were required to do was to take ourselves out of our present work and surroundings so that we could remember some of the aspects of the journey in faith we were making when we ourselves were students. As you can imagine, this was rather easier for some than for others and I was having to dredge up my thoughts and experiences of nearly 45 years ago.

I don't want to bore you with the details but I did find it was a very salutary exercise. It brought me back, not only to the time when, at the age of 21, I was struggling with the call to priesthood, but also to the very start of my own journey in faith at baptism. That is where the journey in faith begins. To be baptised is our greatest privilege. It is where we all start and it creates that equality in relationship with God which unites us all. Of course, as life unfolds, so does our commitment to Christ in the Church in all the many vocations that we can individually embrace. But it is from baptism that we blossom into the single dedicated life, into marriage and parenthood, into ordained ministry or into the many ways in which it is possible to respond to Christ's call to be disciples.

I have found this year's Lenten Sunday readings leading me into a similar pattern of reflection. Through God's love and his loving gift, I have received within myself "the spring of living water, welling up for eternal life." Being born blind for faith, I have been given the capacity to see with the eyes of faith by being initiated into the Christian journey. Sight has been given to me not just for myself but so that, in a mysterious way, "the works of God may be revealed in me."

But I know, just as you know, that again and again on my journey of faith, I have been caught and trapped in the meshes of infidelity, failure and sinfulness. But, I know that, again and again, the Lord has come to the tomb that I have made for myself and in which I have been buried to call me forth and restore me to life. We can all tell the same story of the Lord's mercy, forgiveness and love.

The recovery of memories is an important task and is a vital part in the life of the wonderful communion to which we are called and of which we are part. And even more wonderfully, we have been called so that God may be glorified. We have been saved from ourselves because Christ has been anointed by the Spirit. We have heard the Good News, which is his Gospel. He unbinds and sets us free; we can know and we understand what it means to live with the freedom of the children of God. This is the meaning of the Lord's favour, and we live now in the time of His favour. "He, the faithful witness, loves us; he has washed away our sins with his blood and has made us into a line of kings, priests to serve his God and Father." (**Rev. 1:6**)

Within that fellowship of priests, ordained and lay, which forms the Church and which we celebrate today, all of us have been called "to rebuild ancient ruins, raise what has long laid waste, restore ruined cities... we are called to be famous, and a race that the Lord has blessed." (**Is 61:4**) It is an extraordinary vision of what we in the Church and, in particular, in this local church of the diocese of Portsmouth, are called to be.

We are a rich and varied community of human beings and each of us has an appointed task – some to be priests or deacons within the ordained ministry, some to be teachers, some to be parents, many to be married, others called to the dedication of the single life. Some are called to care for and support the weaker brethren. Many are called to be skilled in the language and ways of the secular world in which we belong but which is, for us, a world through which we pass on our journey to the Father. Others again are called to leave the world to become the heart and soul of the Church in their hidden life of prayer and sacrifice. In these ways, “the small but great story of each vocation intersects with the history of the Church in the world. Just as it is born in the Church and the world, so every call is at the service of the Church and the world.”

Over the years, I have stressed over and over again that we are not simply to be a cosy and self-regarding community in Christ. We are to be a community of disciples, with all the force that word can bring, drawn together by baptism to share the saving work of the Lord, his ministry and, above all, his Word with those who long for good news and new life.

We are all called to minister to all our fellow human beings, but there are those in the Church whose special call is to ministry and pastoral leadership. Bishops, priests and deacons have an indispensable role in the life of the Church to lead, to support and to encourage, or, to put it in another way, to teach, to sanctify and to shepherd. But all who are not ordained are called too – the clergy are not simply a privileged elite. All are called very specifically to evangelise, to teach by word and example, to proclaim faith in God’s word by life style and priorities, to holiness and to the prayerful worship of God.

We can do none of these things on our own – we need one another, we have to be in partnership, but above all, we need that constant presence and sustaining strength of the Lord.

This is why we have to be a Church of sacraments, a community which is able to recognise and celebrate Christ in its midst. This Mass of the Oils is especially a celebration by the whole Church of Christ’s work in us. It is a wonderful gathering of bishop, clergy and people celebrating together our vocation to be the Church in this place. Oils for the Sacraments are blessed but they remain fruitless if they are not used.

The Oil of Catechumens is for growth but it will remain unused if we do not preach the Gospel and there are none to seek baptism so that they can journey more deeply into Christ.

The Oil of Chrism will waste its perfume on the desert air, to quote a phrase, if there are none to respond to Christ’s call to be ministers in his Church and become missionaries in the world through Confirmation and Ordination.

Even the Oil of the Sick will lose its purpose if it simply reverts to being the sign of the end of life and approaching death. Its purpose is surely to be a radical sign of our readiness and willingness to participate in the suffering but saving work of Christ, giving hope and light in a darkened and sinful world.

We are the Church of the Sacraments and we are always changing and always growing. We are aware of the world in which we live but to proclaim the Gospel effectively we need to learn the language and style of the market place in which we find ourselves. Models and styles of ministerial priesthood and lay apostolate change; responsibilities and opportunities for partnership and collaboration develop.

But in all this change, which at times can be so bewildering and disturbing, there is One who remains the same, “yesterday, today and tomorrow”, the Christ on whom the Spirit rests. He is the one in whose year of favour we live. He is the Lord, He is the Good News. He calls us to be his disciples but, as a contemporary author puts it, “He is not content to be our past, He wants to be our future too.”

We gather together today to celebrate together and to pray for one another.

Dear people, pray for your bishop, for your priests and deacons who strive to be generous and faithful to the Lord and to you in the service that they give. Give thanks for their dedicated lives and remember that “a very significant of the Church’s inestimable service to human progress is due to the humble and faithful work of countless priests and deacons who have been generous builders of the civilisation of love.” (**Pope John Paul: Message for Priests 1999**)

Dear brother clergy, pray for the people you serve, cherish them and love them so that they may have life and have it to the full. Our eyes of faith behold a wonderful scene: that of a countless number of lay people, both women and men, busy at work in their daily life and activity, oftentimes far from view and quite unclaimed by the world, unknown to the world’s great personages but nonetheless looked upon in love by the Father, untiring labourers who work in the Lord’s vineyard. Confident and steadfast through the power of God’s grace, these are the humble yet great builders of the Kingdom of God in history.” (**Christifideles Laici: 17**)

We are all God’s people and we are called to fullness of life in Christ, to communion and to mission. I pray that God’s grace and his work may be fulfilled in us today.