

## Sermon for the Mass of the Oils 2001

In his most recent book, the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, makes a very startling claim for his faith. He writes, “the faith of Judaism, beginning with Abraham, is that by acting in response to the call of God, collectively we, the Jewish people, can change the world...we belong to that revolutionary moment at which humanity refuses to accept the world as it is.”

The Chief Rabbi’s faith and hope is deeply rooted in the Old Testament, not least in that passage from Isaiah that we have just heard. Our faith and hope finds its roots in the faith of Abraham as well, but also, in the word of Jesus, the Messiah, who tells us that those words of Isaiah are being fulfilled even as we listen. The “revolutionary moment”, of which the Chief Rabbi writes, is located very precisely for us in the person of Jesus Christ on whom the Spirit rests.

And this is not just a moment of history. Jesus goes further because he anoints us, who are his followers, with the same Spirit of the Lord, so that with Him, and in our fidelity to Him, we can change the world. That “revolutionary moment “of the Lord’s favour is ours because the Lord works through us.

I feel that we often lose that vision of the great design and purpose of our faith – we’re almost fearful of our mission. Perhaps it is simply too awesome to contemplate. We simply can’t believe that we, in all our weaknesses, can ever hope to change our world. But, because of the anointing and the power of the Spirit, this has to be our vision. Too often, as the Holy Father writes in his letter for the close of the Jubilee Year, in our Christian witness, we succumb “to the temptation to offer the world a privatised and individualistic spirituality which ill accords with the demands of charity”. Such a witness threatens no one and changes little.

In the same letter, Pope John Paul challenges our faintheartedness. He urges us to rediscover the power and force of what it means to be baptised. We are not called to settle for what he describes as “a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity.” Baptism is the call to holiness. It is the call to put out into the deep waters of faith. When we entrust ourselves totally to Christ in those deep waters of faith, then we proclaim, by word and by our way of life, the revolution that is the Christian faith.

Our celebration today vividly reminds us of the gifts that He has given us for this confrontation with the increasingly secular and even pagan culture in which we live. Our revolution is not like the other revolutions of history and our weapons are not ones of violence or naked power.

Christ gives us for weapons just the simple things of life – the staple necessities – water and oil, bread and wine. But He invests such power in these simple things that they become the means by which we are converted. Human lives are turned upside down by Word and Sacrament and we are led into a deep commitment of faith, a faith that can move mountains – if, as He says, we believe.

Through the simple, yet powerful words and actions of men and women of faith like ourselves, water becomes the source of new life – “a spring, welling up for eternal life.”

Bread and wine become, at the words of the priest in the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of the Lord – His presence among us, not simply to be adored, but, to be for us “the living bread come down from heaven”, the essential food for our journey of faith.

The oil, which I will shortly bless and consecrate, is “overshadowed” by the power of the Spirit. It becomes the means by which we are transformed to become witnesses and servants of the Word “which gives life.” Men and women are consecrated with the oil of Chrism for this ministry and for this witness when they are confirmed or ordained.

As we approach the end of our lives in this world, we stand on the threshold of that ultimate and definitive meeting with the Lord. Then, we are strengthened by the prayer of the Church and by anointing with oil of the Sick. With infinite gentleness, we are eased into those last stages of our journey of faith into the vision of God.

In recent years, I have ceaselessly talked about our communion and our mission and how we are nourished in both by the sacraments of the Church. It is relatively easy to talk about communion because we all relish and appreciate the warmth and support that community offers us. But what of the mission? What of our public lives as Christians? What influence do we have as a Christian community? Do we make a difference? Is the world a better, a more just and peaceful place because we are here? What of the “revolution” which is the Gospel of Christ? Where is our courage?

We lose heart too easily. We see members of the Church walking no more with us and the media readily convinces us that we are a declining and failing community. We are distressed because we seem unable to attract young people to the Church. We wring our hands, almost in despair, over the diminishing number of vocations to the priesthood and religious life and the thought of losing “our” priest. Where are the optimism and the hope that will make us, in Isaiah’s words, “famous throughout the nations...and clearly a race that the Lord has blessed”?

For a moment, let’s just look at the other side of the picture. This Easter, hundreds of men and women are going to be baptised or received into full communion with us in the Church. Thousands of young people are going to be confirmed in the summer months, thus opening up their lives to the power and movement of the Spirit. Next week with HCPT, and throughout the summer, many – particularly young people – will be serving and working with the sick and the disadvantaged at Lourdes and in many other places of pilgrimage.

Many of our parishes are discovering new life through the grace of the Jubilee, finding it impossible, as the Holy Father reminds us, to return to a dull everyday routine. More and more, through the different Pastoral Councils at diocesan, deanery and parish levels, there is an energetic and enthusiastic collaborative commitment to the prayer and work of the Church.

Our schools – such precious assets of faith – are among the best in the land – and they enable nearly 20,000 children and teenagers to come into a living contact with the Gospel of Christ, which would otherwise be a closed book to them.

We need to recognise and welcome and value the selfless dedication and commitment of the priests and deacons who minister in our communities. We welcome the ordination of two young men, taking place later in the summer. We rejoice in the likelihood that at least four more will be beginning their training for ordination this autumn.

Lastly, and, most importantly, there are yourselves, gathered here today. You represent thousands of faithful husbands and wives, families and any number of dedicated single people and all of you have a vital part to play in the mission of the diocese. All of us, in our different ways, are deeply committed to the faith and, working in partnership, we show the richness of Christ at work in our midst.

There is huge potential in our diocese for mission. It is wrong for us to talk ourselves into a spiral of decline. We may, perhaps, be sometimes described as a sleeping giant, but if we can be awoken and really take hold of the power that the Lord's anointing gives us, then there'll be no holding us. Christ will be known here and His Good News will be both heard and experienced. Through the inspiration of the Spirit, we can – and will – make a difference.

I have good news to share with you and it is the news of the kingdom. It is Resurrection news. It is about new life and hope. Our mourning and our despondency can be turned into gladness. Our frailty and diffidence can be transformed into courageous and loving witness. Our way of living can bring hope and light to all as we struggle with the darkness of the world.

We know that the world is not as it ought to be, but through the power of the anointing Spirit, at work in each one of us, we can change that. This is what it means to enter the year of the Lord's favour.

I can't promise you easy days ahead – especially as we follow in the footsteps of our suffering Lord in this Holy Week – but I can promise you resurrection and new life and the continuing companionship and presence of the Lord. "He loves us and washes away our sins" and gives us the power to overcome the world. So let's take courage. Christ tells us that he has overcome the world and he is constantly praying for us.