

Sermon for the Mass of the Oils 2002

I began my Lenten journey of faith with these words that I shared with you all in a pastoral letter when I wrote: "For me, Lent is a very special time when Jesus invites me to seek His face, to be caught up in His life and love, and to be with Him on His journey to Calvary and to Easter." The journey of faith always takes us along roads of the Lord's choosing. Sometimes, they are full of joy but, sometimes, as recent events in our diocese have shown, they can be full of suffering and sadness.

So I can say today that it is with a real eagerness that I have looked forward to this celebration and, to quote Jesus' own words, "I have ardently longed to eat this Passover with you." (*Luke 22:15*) And now, I want to tell you why.

Recent events, and the publicity that has come with them, have been a heavy burden, not just for me or for the clergy, but for us all. I have shared my sadness and even my anger with the priests and deacons who are gathered here today and I want you all to know what wonderful support, love and wise holiness they have shared with me in return. Dear people, you have before you a body of priests and deacons who are outstanding in their commitment and love of the Lord and devoted to their ministry in our diocese and to all of us who make up this gathered community of the disciples of Christ. I – you – all of us are very blessed. This is why I have longed for this celebration, because it is such a wonderful way for us all to gain heart and confidence and trust for the journey of faith that lies ahead.

Just as we were at the beginning of Lent, so today, we are challenged once again by the face of Christ. This time, it is not, perhaps, by the silent but intense look of love. This time we are confronted by the Lord speaking to us with passion and zeal about His work and about the mission that He wants us to share with Him. He gazes at us now with a new intensity and says, "I have come to cast fire on the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already." (*Luke 12:49*)

The call to share with Him in the building of the Kingdom comes, as it were, from the pulpit of the synagogue. This was where He was often to be found, praying with His people and teaching them. But, for the most part, His work took Him from the "pulpit" to the "pavement"- as a distinguished Evangelical preacher recently put it. It took Him to the highways and byways, to the fields and villages, to the places where ordinary people were to be found.

There's an important place for the pulpit and the sanctuary in our life of faith because that's where we find the strength and the courage to be and to proclaim the good news to our times. But this challenge – the work of evangelisation - touches us all. It isn't the preserve of the clergy - it belongs to all Christ's disciples – it is a task that He entrusts to the whole Church.

There is in the Church what might be described as a divine economy, one in which clergy and people are inextricably entwined. We need each other, we need to work together if Jesus' vision of the year of the Lord's favour is to be realised. Those working on the "pavement" cannot survive without the ministry of those who stand in the "pulpit".

We need the Word to be proclaimed and broken for us in the Eucharist. We need to be immersed in the waters of baptism to gain fellowship with Christ and with each other and to hear that we are indeed the beloved of the Father. We need the gifts of the Spirit if we are to proclaim with courage and fire the presence of the Kingdom. We need to be, as Lazarus was, unbound and set free from the death that sin brings to us. We need to be reconciled with one

another and with the Father if we are truly to be named "priests of the Lord, ministers of our God...famous throughout the nations...and a race whom the Lord has blessed" (*Isaiah 61*)

The ministry of the "pulpit", which, by and large, is the preserve of the clergy, though not exclusively so, cannot be separated from the ministry of those on the "pavement", in the towns and villages where we all live. Together - clergy and people together - we are called "to be anointed...to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to new sight to the blind, to set the downtrodden free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (*Luke 4:18*)

As Jesus looks on us now – clergy and people – His brothers and sisters - with that intensity that stems from His own zeal for the Kingdom, so He demonstrates an overwhelming desire for us to deepen our commitment as His disciples. He sees our weakness and our frailties, our failures and our infidelities, and yet, in spite of everything, He calls us still. And we do our best to respond.

Today, in a special way, it is the turn of those of us, who are priests and deacons, called and ordained for ministry within this great diocese, to renew our commitment to the Lord and to you. In a few days from now, buoyed up by the wonder and mystery of the Resurrection, all of us together will pledge ourselves, once again, to renounce the sin that brings us to death. Instead, we will embrace the faith that brings life – the life of the Risen Christ. This is life, not just for us, but also for the whole world – and for that particular patch of "pavement", which the Lord has entrusted to us.

All these commitments, these aspirations and all our hopes - are caught up in this celebration that is ours today. I hope you can see now why I have so longed "eat this Passover with you." You can understand now why we needed, so urgently, to gather together in this place. We are celebrating together and joyously recognising that the Lord "loves us and has washed away our sins with His blood, and has made us –all of us – a line of kings, priests to serve His God and Father. To Him, then, be glory and power for ever and ever. Amen." (*Apoc 1:5*)

Despite the dark days, I am filled with joy and hope and I pray that God may bless you all and fill you with the same great hope and joy that springs from Easter.