

Mass of the Oils Homily Tuesday, 22 March 2005

“This is my Body, given for you... This is my Blood, shed for you” – these words have been absolutely central to my life for nearly 40 years. I must have spoken them - ‘with intent’ as they say – some 15000 times.

Though I have not always consciously realised it, they are words of literally cosmic significance. After God’s great word of creation, spoken at the beginning of time, these are the most awe-inspiring words that have ever been uttered. If I were able to contemplate their full significance every time I said them, I would be completely overwhelmed by their import.

They are, of course, Christ’s words, but they are spoken by the priest so that, in Christ’s name, he may continue to make present and proclaim for the whole community that we are in the moment of the Lord’s favour. It is an immense privilege for a human person to be the instrument by which and through whom Jesus continues to testify that the Spirit has anointed him to proclaim the time of God’s favour. But it’s not a privilege that rests just with the priest. It belongs to the whole priestly people, commissioned through their baptism and in their discipleship to bring about the fulfilment of the Lord’s anointing by the Spirit.

The words of consecration – and the whole celebration of the Eucharist – are a living testimony to the saving presence of the Lord among his people, giving his life continuously and eternally for the salvation of the world. This is the Good News and it is entrusted to us all – priests and priestly people. Because of this, we are indeed, as Isaiah reminds us, “famous among the people”, and “a race whom the Lord has blessed.”

Our celebration of the Eucharist and our sharing in that celebration is, par excellence, Christ’s way of continuing to bring the good news to the poor, proclaiming liberty to captives, new sight to the blind and freedom for the downtrodden. Remember again and cherish his words “This is my Body, given for you... This is my blood shed for you” - today.

The Eucharist can be, for some, a very private celebration and devotion – there’s nothing wrong with that in itself – but it’s not enough. The Eucharist has dimensions that go far beyond the private and the devotional. The phrase “my Mass” has no real significance when it is set alongside the centrality of the proclamation of the Lord’s favour, achieved for us in the sacrifice of Calvary and celebrated by all of us in the sacrificial meal, which we call Eucharist.

The Eucharist is at the heart of our whole life as Catholic Christians. Everything we do points to it. Everything we do flows from it. The Word we proclaim, and the profession of faith that flows from that proclamation, prepares us to hear and receive those saving and consecrating words. The strength that comes from sharing in the gift of the Lord’s Body and Blood – the life of Christ – enables us, in our turn, to be anointed and sent – we are empowered by the life-giving gift of Christ to be good news for the poor and to proclaim, for our time, the year of the Lord’s favour.

The centrality of the Eucharist is abundantly apparent in all our worship – in fact, it is sometimes said that the Mass is too central for us – we have nothing else to offer – but then, what more can we offer, or indeed receive, than the life of Christ enshrined in his gift of his Body and Blood?

All the sacraments – such rich and different ways of realising and experiencing the saving presence of Christ – are best celebrated within the Mass. This is why the Oils, which are an

essential element in the administration of three of our great sacraments, are blessed and consecrated in this celebration of Eucharist today.

The Holy Father has asked all Catholics to make this year very special through concentration and emphasis on the celebration of the Eucharist. I am conscious that I have not done as much as I should to promote this, which is why I take this opportunity today of speaking of these sacred mysteries.

We need to deepen our understanding and love of the Mass, recognising and acknowledging that it is the greatest gift the Lord can give us. This Year of the Eucharist is, of course, about adoration and devoted prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, but it is also – and, I believe, more importantly – about how we celebrate the Mass in our parishes and communities and the degree to which we are drawn into this extraordinary manifestation of God's love for us. "Greater love than this no one has than to lay down life for friends...and you are my friends" says the Lord.

But whether in celebration or in devotion and adoration, the Eucharist is always the Body given for us and the Blood shed for us. The one who so gives us his life is the one on whom God's spirit and favour rests, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Through the Eucharist, his gift to us, he invites us into communion with him and with each other. At the same time, he sends us out in the strength of that communion as a community of proclamation and witness "to bring good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to those in prison, to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord." In receiving these self-same gifts from the Lord, in his name, we are enabled and empowered to give them to others.

So everything, in the end, comes round again to Communion and Mission, those two great watchwords which stand at the heart of the renewal in parish and diocese in which we are engaged, that growing together in Christ for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.