

## Sermon for the Mass of the Oils 2008

One of the particular joys and pleasures for me in the last year has been the opportunity to preside over Masses which have celebrated the completion of Leadership Courses up and down the length of the diocese. There have been 3 such courses so far and 2 more are still in progress and altogether they have involved 200 or so people. Lest anyone should think that they have been exclusive to lay people, it is interesting to note that parish priests have been present at all the celebrations with their parishioners and a number of priests have themselves also taken part in the courses.

All this leads me to the joyful understanding of how today's Mass is a wonderful celebration not only of ministerial priesthood and but of leadership in the diocese. The priests and deacons gather here with me, together with so many of you, representative of the parishes and communities of the diocese, to renew our commitment and response to what it means to have been called by the Lord and to be given the Spirit of the Lord.

We all stand before the Lord today to offer prayer and thanksgiving for the gifts we have been given, gifts which enable us all to offer the leadership of professed faith to our communities.

This, in turn, leads me to reflect on the nature of Christian leadership. What does it consist of? Does it mean the domination by one group of all the others? Does it mean taking the lead in everything, regardless of the talents and treasures of others? Does it rest solely on the clergy by right through the Sacrament of Orders?

In its simplest form, Christian leadership is none of these things. Our life in the diocese today, particularly as it develops under the Pastoral Plan – *Go out and Bear Fruit* - is characterised by the sign we give of working together for an enriched sense of communion – we are all baptised and so we belong to Christ and to one another. In that communion, we become more faithful to the mission Christ gives us to “preach and live the Good News”. We do this best by “bringing that good news to the poor, bringing liberty to captives and new sight to the blind, and by setting the downtrodden free”. We do all these things together and collaboratively.

Let me take you back to the Gospel that was read on February 22nd on that rather curious feast of the Chair of Peter. St Matthew tells the story of Christ asking the disciples who the people thought he was. They offer a number of suggestions, as you will remember, but then comes the crucial question to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Throughout the history of the Church, that question has always been the simplest yet the most demanding challenge to our faith and it can be very personal – not only “who do you say that I am” but also “who is Christ for me today”. We have always needed – and still need - someone, be it Pope, bishop, priest, deacon or lay person who will have the courage – and the faith - to say for us “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

When we are gracefully enabled to say those words to ourselves, to one another, to our parishes and communities and to the wider world, we are exercising Christian leadership in its simplest and most compelling form. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” are words of sublime faith and witness which form us into a community and communion of disciples, intent on proclaiming “the year of the Lord's favour” – the good news of the Kingdom.

My reflections on these words lead me further and more deeply into our celebration of Mass today and every day.

Four times in this celebration, I have said – and will say – the words “The Lord be with you” and you will reply “And also with you.” Each of these occasions is a mutual affirmation and recognition that the Spirit of the Lord is upon us. Because that Spirit is upon us, our hearts are touched and enabled to approach the Lord and each celebration with contrite and converted lives. Because the Lord is with us, we can hear and respond in a singular and radical way to the Gospel that is proclaimed. Because we recognise and affirm the presence of the Lord to each and all of us, we can lift up our hearts and so enter into the supreme moment of worship, sacrifice and communion with the Lord, which is the Eucharistic Prayer. Lastly, because the Lord is always with us, we are empowered at the end of Mass to go out - to be sent – to the whole world in mission and with the good news of word and life in our hearts and in the how of our living.

All these things make today such a special moment in the life of our diocese - Bishop, priests, deacons and lay people – one great community of faith – are committed to leadership in professing faith in “Christ, the Son of the Living God” so that “the world may have life and have it to the full.”

Isaiah’s wonderful words are both challenging and humbling: “You will be named ‘priests of the Lord’...’ministers of our God’...Your race will be famous throughout the nations...all who see us will admit that we are a race whom the Lord has blessed...anointed with the Spirit of the Lord.” This great celebration, this Mass of the Oils, which marks and shapes our whole year, and at which your bishop, your priests and deacons renew their commitment to the service of the Lord and to you, his people, is a wonderful moment for all of us and a time when truly “we can sing for ever of the love of the Lord.”