

Chrism Mass 2021 – Zoom

1 Samuel 16.1-13a; Psalm 89.19-30; 2 Corinthians 3.17–4.12; Luke 22.24-30

Dear friends, in these difficult pandemic times we all miss each other very much. We feel the limits imposed on us acutely on days like today. For the second year in a row we have had no physical gatherings for the Chrism mass. Beyond the *sacred* purpose of renewing our vows of ministry and blessing the oils for our sacraments, those gatherings have been times when we share real collegial and joyful friendship, as we vest together before the service, and as we share the light Lent meal which is usually on offer. We pray earnestly that such opportunities will return next year. Today's gathering for ordained and lay ministers, although not physical, helps us connect as a community of ministers, to support each other and recommit each other to our *common* service to the people of the diocese.

In these difficult covid times much good has happened, through your faithfulness. You have developed an abundance of creativity. You have encouraged the best from our people: encouraging them to reach out to the community, to keep in touch with the lonely, to sustain the isolated with messages of encouragement and hope. In so many beautiful ways that we could not have imagined, your communities are offering worship, having pastoral meetings and a holding a variety of study groups. Our chaplaincies have flooded the digital highways, and that has been a joyful surprise for us all!

There is further benefit to our seclusion, our “imposed monasticism”. We have had time to think about what is important in our lives and how we might live simpler lives in the future. Deprived of a full and frequent eucharistic life we have been drawn into a deeper appreciation of the rhythm of the daily office. We have been feasting more deeply on the living Word in psalm and Holy Scripture. Where the eucharistic table is not so easily accessible for some, we have rediscovered how to dine daily at the Table of the Word. Dear friends, it is on this ministry of the *Word* I want to spend a moment today.

All of us gathered to renew our vows have a range of responsibilities in the Church. Bishops have an apostolic role to lead the whole people of God in the Church's mission. Priests are shepherds, the pastors of local communities, bringing them together to celebrate the sacraments of our redemption. Deacons are heralds of the kingdom and servants of the poor and marginalised. Readers assist the clergy, sharing in their pastoral and evangelistic work. But one thing unites all of us: the *ministry of the Word*. According to our formularies Readers are to “preach and teach the word of God”. Deacons are charged with “proclaiming the Gospel in word and in deed”. Priests are to “preach the word in season and out of season”. Bishops are directed “to expound the Gospel of salvation”. Preaching the word is the common thread woven into each of our diverse ministries. St Paul today reminds us that at the heart of our preaching ministry is the proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord, a message *that brings light out of darkness*.

We are living in a time when *bringing light out of darkness*, is challenging! The Church in Europe is living a biblical experience of exile. In the Scriptures exile is a *spiritual* condition not only a geographical one. In the Old Testament exile was when God's people found themselves trying to be faithful in an alien environment, even at times a hostile one. Well, we are, most of us, living in an alien environment. In almost all our countries less than 20% of people think that religion is important in their lives. In England, the C of E's central structures are getting nervous; it is predicted that for the first time ever fewer than 50% of people in the UK will have ticked “Christian” in the census this month.

Scripture warns us about ancient Israel in exile; the people of God faced the temptation to assimilate into the dominant culture around them, as a survival technique. That is the challenge facing Christians in our lands today: the great pull to conform, instead of being salt and light –

bringing light out of darkness. So much about our western ways are incongruent with our faith. I think of the growing intolerance towards minorities and migrant communities. We witness attempts at legislation to curtail certain freedoms of expression among such communities, in Denmark and Hungary, for instance. The UK seeks to defy international law by judging an asylum seeker's need for protection based on how, in their desperation, they have arrived on this island! There is a growing lack of cooperation among nations, for the common good of the planet's peoples. We have witnessed this most recently in the disputes about the supply and delivery of vaccines for instance.

People might ask, "but what does this have to do with religion? Is this not more about politics?" This question as we know betrays a complete misunderstanding of our faith. This is the week of the passion and death of Jesus Christ. This week is about God that *shatters* what the world *assumes* about God. God is not some celestial monarch, sitting on a heavenly throne untouched and untroubled by the storms that rage here on earth. This week we see God the Son, not on a sapphire throne, *but on a cross*, despised, rejected, suffering. God the Son stands with us *in the midst of the storms of this life*. His message imparted to his disciples, to the Church, is about lifting up the lowly, caring for lost sheep, embracing the shunned, selfless service, like that of the Samaritan, to the one who is very different from me. God the Son, suffering and dying, ensures *our faith is about real flesh and blood issues*. So preaching the Gospel of justice, of inclusion, of welcome, of compassion, of sharing what we have, this is the Gospel of the Incarnate One, who brings light to the darkness of this world.

Today we renew ministerial vows, but let us consider also our vows of *discipleship*. When we bishops celebrate the sacrament of confirmation, the candidates answer a question put to them: "will you acknowledge Christ's authority over human society, *by defending the weak, and by seeking peace and justice.*" The implication is clear: to be a Christian disciple is a vocation which is about the pursuit of justice, concern for the poor and the weak, and the building of peace. As preachers our task is to strengthen the disciples in this solemn vow that they have made. We are to inspire a sense of mission for those who hear our preaching, equipping *them* to spread the liberating news of the Gospel in the world, helping them to connect that life-giving Gospel to the social and public issues that affect the common good.

In this diocese we are focussed right now on two aspects of this kingdom centred Gospel: racial justice and the environment. We are exploring together another area – how a diverse community in terms of sexuality and gender can live together in love and faith. But there are so many more – the Gospels are filled with insights into what the reign of justice and peace looks like. It is that reign, that kingdom, for which we pray each day and for which we work as builders.

Dear sister and brother preachers, our task of preaching the values of the kingdom is not easy. Certain issues of justice can divide a congregation. Some voices were concerned about our racial justice paper, for instance. Some would prefer that we should stick to "spiritual themes" rather than matters like climate change. There will be a whole range of opinions on just about anything we might want to say about human sexuality. So, since we homilists are also charged with building up the body of Christ *in unity*, here is a tip, known to all of you I am sure: it may sometimes be best for us in our preaching to raise the great issues of justice in the form of *questions*, rather than suggesting concrete solutions. But raised they must be, if we are faithful to the Word Made Flesh.

Finally, our preaching is to be a clear expression of God's saving love. People beyond the walls of the Church think we are more interested in our internal rules, about our own moral codes. But Jesus did not impose regulations and moral codes. He invited people into a *community no questions asked*, a community marked with joy, with equality, with warmth and compassion.

In home or family life there are three great messages we like to hear are: first, “I love you”; second, “you are forgiven”, and third, “dinner is ready”! In our communities and in our preaching these three messages should ring out clearly for they sum up the message of Jesus Christ: Love, forgiveness, and an invitation to dine at the banquet of the kingdom where all are welcome and all are satisfied.

Thank God this great ministry of the Word entrusted to us is not without support. St Paul tells us today we are but earthen vessels, clay jars. But we are clay jars which God fills with extraordinary grace through the power of God’s Spirit. All of you likely know I have a great fondness for another earthen vessel: Mary the mother of the Incarnate Word. For me she is a model disciple. See how God’s Spirit guided her: She was open to hearing God speak, for her it was through the message of an angel. She pondered the truth about her Son her heart. In her Magnificat she boldly spoke the prophetic word. The same Spirit of God acted on us in our baptism, and is in us, and with us. We are open to listening to that Spirit each day in our prayer, daily office, and study of Scriptures. We are attentive to the Spirit as we read the signs of the times, pondering what Christ’s Gospel says about the good things around us in the world, as well as the bad; we trust God’s Spirit to help us speak his word into that reality.

My sisters and brothers, the bishops thank you for all you are doing to serve Jesus Christ our living Word. A worship song from the 1980s by Jim Strathdee sums up our common commitment today:

“openly we share God’s word, speaking truth as we believe, praying that this troubled world would healing light receive”. In this ministry we are united.