

HOMILY AT THE CHRISM MASS

given by Archbishop Kevin McDonald
on Maundy Thursday, 9th April 2009
at Saint George's Cathedral, Southwark

The celebration of the Chrism Mass is one of the highpoints of the liturgical calendar. It is very much a diocesan event; a joyful, public celebration from which we move on to celebrate the Holy Week Triduum in our parishes. So a public celebration - but one which is also very personal, and personal in a particular way for priests who renew their commitment today and who will be the principal users of the oils that are blessed today. The readings either point to or focus on the person of Jesus and his ministry, and because of that they speak very personally to all those in the church who exercise a ministry in his name, and especially, as I say, today, to priests.

The life of a priest is lived in a complex and sometimes hectic web of personal relationships. He is closely involved in people's lives, and the three different oils that are blessed specify some key moments in the life of a priest and in the lives of those we serve. The oil of catechumens reminds us of baptism, the moment when someone becomes a Christian and, particularly at this time of year, we think of those adults who have found faith and will be baptised and received into the Church at the Easter Vigil. The oil of the sick reminds us of the special importance within the body of Christ of those who are sick or suffering. They have an indispensable role, as St Paul says, in making up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ. Today, we recognise both the vital importance of ministry to the sick and the vital role the sick play in the

life of the parish, the diocese and the whole Church. And in this context I would particularly mention the elderly and those with age-related diseases. We should be those who have a particular respect and concern for them, rooted in our respect for all human life, irrespective of age or condition. And the oil of chrism brings to mind again the sacrament of baptism, and also of confirmation – and we think especially of those being received into the Catholic Church at Easter – and crucially, the sacrament of ordination. These are all key moments in an individual's journey of faith which are also moments when God's choice and God's action in peoples' lives become a public reality in the Church and in society as a whole.

The blessing of the oils reminds us of the life of service which is specific to a priest but which he also shares with our deacons and with all those with whom he collaborates. Today, there is a great need for people who serve and for people who have the qualities of commitment and perseverance that underpin a life of service. Indeed our society is crying out for good social workers, good teachers, good medical professionals, for people who are ready and able to address the many deep needs of people in society today.

The first reading and the Gospel acknowledge this need. They speak of captives, of those who mourn, those whose hearts are broken. And there

are so many people who in one way or another are isolated in their trouble. There is no greater dignity than that of being one of those who minister to them. Just think of some of the problems we're particularly aware of – mostly rooted in fear of the future: the financial crisis and the fear of poverty, unemployment, homelessness and inadequate health care, the fear of terrorism, of violence and knife crime in local communities, and, indeed, the fear for the future of our planet, for the very survival of humanity. We're likewise very aware of problems that are often bad ways of coping with trouble: I think, for example, of the sharp rise in alcoholism, especially among the young. There is no shortage of false friends, but the oils we bless today symbolise and express the true healing that gives hope to the human heart and gives new life in the here and now. They speak of a new order, of a new way of being.

To access this life, however, to benefit from the sacramental ministry of the Church, we need faith. Having had a lot to do with medical professionals over the last two years, I realise the importance of having faith in those who are trying to help you. This Cathedral today is full of people of faith, and it is up to us to spread that faith and help people see the need for the life that is given through faith. We know that our coming together is meaningless unless we believe – unless we believe in the message that is put before us in the second reading – that is the foundation on which everything else stands or falls. The foundation is Jesus Christ, the first-born from the dead, who loves us and who washed away our sins with his blood. He is Our Lord, the Alpha and the Omega, our first beginning and our last end. He it is who will come again in glory. That faith in his coming again is the context and justification for

our coming together today. "Everyone will see him" the scripture tells us, "even those who pierced him," and those words put before us the image of the crucified Lord from whose side flowed blood and water for our life and our healing.

A true believer is someone who is at peace with the particularity, the specificity of faith, by which I mean the absolute and unique significance of the person of Jesus Christ whose death was the focal point of human history. And from the very beginnings of the Church there have been those for whom this has been a stumbling block. But today, we confirm one another in our faith which is not limiting or confining, but inclusive and reaching out to all people. It is a faith which recognises that the Spirit of God can be at work in the lives of people of other religions and of people who are seeking the truth but who have no explicit faith.

All trust, all faith, all hope finds its true object in Christ and the life of a priest reflects and embodies all this: a priest meets so many people, all at different stages on the path towards faith, or on the path of faith itself. He is open to everyone.

May today be a day of renewal for all of us, and a real preparation for the celebration of the Lord's Supper, his crucifixion, death and resurrection. This is our faith and we are proud to profess it in Christ Jesus, Our Lord. Amen.