

# Homily given at the Mass of Chrism

Thursday 24 March 2005

by **The Most Reverend Kevin McDonald**  
**Archbishop of Southwark**

---

Our Chrism Mass this year falls in the Year of the Eucharist, and on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the assassination in El Salvador of Archbishop Oscar Romero – a bishop who was sent to bring Good News to the poor and who was killed while doing what was most central to his ministry and to ours, namely, celebrating the Eucharist. Good News to the poor.

Last week I met the new Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and he was explaining to a group of Church leaders how he saw his job, and I was very struck that he began by talking about the despair in our society: the despair of poverty, of people whose lives are marked by deprivation and by drug abuse. He also used the word community a lot and it made me think about the society in which we live and minister, in which there is so much pain and conflict, so much division and so much need, so much hunger for healing, for life, and for belonging.

Our situation is different from the one in which Archbishop Romero was murdered, but the need for the community that comes into being through the celebration of Mass is just as acute; so, too, is the need for good news and for anointing, and healing and absolution.

These are fitting reflections for this Mass which is about priesthood, and in which we acknowledge the priesthood that we share, when we express our fraternity and solidarity in the exercise of priestly ministry and renew our commitment to it. The commitment we made to the priesthood was made once for all when we were ordained by the laying on of hands and anointing with the oil of

chrism. At that moment we took on a new identity, a new way of being. Today's Mass remembers that and provides the context in which we renew our commitment to it. Doing that together is itself important because we do not exercise our priesthood alone: we live it and exercise it as a body, as a presbyterate. Indeed, the building up of the presbyterate is vital for the life of the Church. It is important that we affirm and celebrate together the gift of the priesthood which is not something private but is a public ministry exercised in the diocese and is a participation in the priesthood of the bishop. Together we respond to the spiritual needs of this local Church but, to do that effectively, fraternity and solidarity need to be fostered, nurtured and strengthened.

But it's also true that our common response to the needs of our people finds its impetus and motivation in the continuing response of each one of us to God's action in our lives, put before us unequivocally in today's liturgy. "The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me." We hear this from the voice of the prophet Isaiah and Jesus makes these words his own in the synagogue on the Sabbath Day. Today those words are ours, too; we say on our own account: "The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me." We have been claimed and configured to Christ the High Priest for the same purpose: "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour."

The oils we bless symbolise what we are, what we're for, and what we do. It's important that they are blessed by the bishop, making clear the communion and the common enterprise we share. It's important, likewise, that the blessing takes place in the Eucharist which we celebrate and so express that communion: one Lord, one faith, one baptism. It's important also that the renewal of priestly commitment takes place in the presence of the whole Church: bishops, priests, deacons, religious and the whole people of God. And we are particularly blessed this year with the presence of the Papal Nuncio: a strong reminder that we in this diocese are part of the whole communion of the Catholic Church throughout the world, and in these days our thoughts and prayers are very much with Pope John Paul, whose ministry at this time reveals so much about the true nature of priesthood, about how to understand it and live it. Not as a function but as a way of being.

So this Mass focuses on priesthood. But, precisely for that reason, as I've already said, it directly involves every single person here today, lay and ordained, because priesthood is for people; sacraments are for people. The oils blessed are for baptism, confirmation, anointing the sick, and the ordaining of priests and bishops. Sacramental ministry lies at the heart of priestly life. It shapes and defines our lives, but our lives are more than the conferring of sacraments. It's a whole way of living, of relating, of reaching out and bringing life. It is about love for our people. As I go round the diocese, I see very clearly the love and appreciation of people for their priests and the love and concern of priests for people. This kind of total and permanent commitment is so foreign to much

contemporary thinking about choice, about work and even about human identity. But it is our strength – the continuing response to a gift bestowed once for all. We are, and must be, supported in this way of being, and those who support us and work with us are here or represented here today: the deacons with whom we share the ministry of Word and Service of God, our religious and those people with whom we collaborate most closely – a collaboration that is vital in the Church today – and by all our people in whose response we find strength.

Of course, priesthood has its difficulties: often the things that are tiresome and harassing are not things that are integral to priestly ministry but responsibilities that have grown up around it. But we mustn't let them distract us from the profound significance of what we do, or from going forward together, from living our priesthood to the full, and from engaging with the challenges and dilemmas that lie before us. It's not for us to be disheartened about God's purposes and God's future. What is more, we know all too well the pattern of God's work in the world is a pattern of dying and rising. There's nothing strange about trouble. Our life must be one that is lived in patience but in faith in the power of God. Let us celebrate this day and this Holy Week in confidence and peace, and as we follow in the footsteps of Christ, our High Priest, let the wisdom of the Cross be our source of life and hope.