

Homily of Archbishop Kevin McDonald for The Chrism Mass St. George's Cathedral, Southwark on Maundy Thursday 13th April 2006

The Lord has called us together today and we are here in obedience to his command. Together we have heard the reading from the book of the Apocalypse which focuses our attention on Jesus, on the Lord and it is on him that our hearts and minds should be set during this very important liturgy. "I am the Alpha and the Omega" says the Lord, 'the God who is, who was, and is to come'. Everyone will see him, even those who pierced him. We come here to meet Jesus, our Risen and glorious Lord and we come in expectation of his coming again in glory. And it is that focus that binds us together and makes us a communion, makes us the Church. The focus is Jesus Christ.

And that of course, is the case for all the liturgies of the Easter Triduum that you will celebrate in your Churches. Tonight we remember the institution of the Eucharist that took place before Jesus' passion and death and which is our permanent memorial of it, making it present today. Tomorrow we follow Christ in his passion and venerate the cross on which he died on. At the Easter Vigil we celebrate his rising from the dead, the fact that he is living- Alpha and Omega - our first beginning and our last end. Today, and the three days to come are days for proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and for celebrating the mysteries of our religion with faith, hope and love. All these liturgies are both very public and deeply personal. They should engage us at the deepest level of our being. They cannot be celebrated lightly or half heartedly- this is the very core of our faith; and the centre of our lives.

This is true in a particular way for priests in this liturgy of the Chrism Mass. My brother priests renew their priestly commitment and so this Mass is a key focus in the liturgical year for priests. It brings us back to what is fundamental and yet can be lost sight of, namely the Risen Lord, Alpha and Omega who called us to his service in a unique way. That calling shapes and defines our whole lives, our whole self-understanding, our whole way of thinking about life, about work, about sorrow and about joy. Above all, the recognition that we are called should be a source of confidence, confidence in where we are, in what we do, in what we are all about.

The first reading we heard at today's Mass was also read at the ordination of the new bishops. It is often chosen for ordination Masses. "The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me" We're called because we have been chosen and that fact should stay with us and be our source of inner strength. It's a scripture to which we all need to return, a scripture that should continue to shape our prayer:

"The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me". It is a word that grounds all we do

and say, giving us confidence in whatever tasks or issues we are engaged in. It gives no permission for arrogance or self-satisfaction because it focuses not on us but on the Lord who calls us, who called us from our mother's womb, and who calls us each day, who gives us a disciple's ear. We never stop being disciples of the Lord who first called us. The renewal of priestly commitment is a renewed acknowledgement of Jesus Christ who calls us every day and in every new situation however rewarding or however difficult, however satisfying, however perplexing.

But the renewal of priestly promises is directly and strictly connected to the other major event in this liturgy, namely the blessing of the oil of Chrism, of Catechumens, and of the sick. The central place of the blessing of the oils in this liturgy tells us why we're called and what we're called to do and to be. It tells us that we are called and sent. Sent to people: to minister to people. That is what priests are for. The people to whom priests are sent are for him. They are his life. His life makes no sense without them and without everything that is involved in serving them. A priest must want to be with people and to be for his people. He must recognise the people to whom he has been sent as his people and the ones whom the Lord has put in his way. The Cure D'Ars set off to leave Ars three times. But he always went back. He went back to those to whom he belonged and who belonged to him. Living in that confidence is an act of faith and a test of faith. It's an exercise of freedom and a test of freedom. Freedom to recognise the Lord who calls and the people to whom we are called to follow readily wherever that call takes us.

That marvellous reading from the Apocalypse tells us why all our people matter whether those who are very much engaged with the life of the Church and those who are far away. "He loves us and has washed away our sins with his blood". There is a sentence in the service for the ordering of priests in The Book of Common Prayer which makes this point in beautiful English. It says 'Have always therefore printed in your remembrance, how great a treasure is committed to your charge. For they are the sheep of Christ, which he bought with his death and for whom he shed his blood'

That is the message we preach to everyone and that is the reality which we proclaim and minister to all.

Today I encourage all our priests to be strong, confident, faithful and free and ask you all to give them your love, understanding, your support, and your prayers.

Amen.