

The Chrism Mass
Saint George's Cathedral, Southwark
Wednesday, 31st March 2010

Homily of Bishop John Hine

In these challenging times for the church, times of shame, of apologies, of great hurt, it is particularly poignant that we priests are gathered together to renew our commitment to our calling. I don't know about you, my fellow priests, but I guess that most of us, priests and people, over the last few weeks have suffered great waves of different emotions, perhaps of anger, or of shame, perhaps disgust. For myself at times I have just felt very lost.

The justified anger of the voices of the abused leave me with a sense that all those many years of priestly ministry are now somehow tainted. How could this have happened? Where do we go from here?

When I prayed about what I should say to you today, I got this overwhelming sense that we simply have to pick ourselves up and start again, but not in our own strength. The image that came into my mind was that of the prophet Elijah, running away, in despair, lying down under the furze bush and saying 'I have had enough – I want to give up'.

But we all know what happened next – the angel of the Lord fed him, not once but twice and strengthened him for the journey ahead and he picked himself up and travelled on to Horeb, the mountain of God, where he had a new encounter with God.

That feeding of Elijah is seen as a prefiguring of the Eucharist. Tomorrow evening we will all be celebrating the Last Supper in our parishes. How can that be a new start for us, in the sort of way that being fed was a new start for Elijah?

In 2004 Pope John Paul the second said something very simple to the priests of the world "At the Last Supper we were born as priests".

At other times he elaborated on this "the Eucharistic sacrifice is the centre and root of the whole priestly life" (JP 2 '93); "The Eucharist is the *raison d'être* of the priesthood" (JP2 *Dominicae Cenae*).

So it is absolutely right that we should be gathered here around the table of the Eucharist humbly renewing our commitment as his ministers and praying to be 'born' again as priests.

I am going to mention two aspects of the Mass, that strike me as being particularly pertinent to our circumstances today - Covenant and Sacrifice.

First, Covenant: 'This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant'.

The Eucharist reminds us that we are people of the new covenant. And that God is always faithful to his covenant. We struggle to be faithful. We do not wish just to be fair-weather friends, faithful to our commitment only when things are fine and easy. We are called to be faithful in the difficult times. Jesus Christ was faithful to death, death on a Cross. He strengthens us in our weakness with the blood of the new and everlasting covenant.

The Mass is the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross offered for the salvation of the world. Sacrifice and suffering go together.

Let us think about sacrifice in our own lives for a moment

“Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps” *1 Peter 2:21*.

We recognise this in our people – the amount of daily sacrifice for each other that goes on in their families and in their homes.

“My brothers, I implore you by God’s mercy to offer your very selves to him: a living sacrifice, dedicated and fit for his acceptance” *Rom 12 1*.

So there is no following of Christ unless that notion of sacrifice is firmly embedded in our spirituality, and perhaps particularly as priests, with that great privilege of standing at the altar offering the sacrifice of the Mass for all people, that notion of self-giving is absolutely core.

There is undoubtedly a great deal of sacrifice already in your lives as you minister unselfishly to your people - a priest’s life can be extremely demanding. It is good to recognise this, but perhaps, not just to recognise it, but to value it, to take a positive grasp of it – this is who we are as priests offering Mass daily at the altar, trying to offer ourselves with the sacrifice of Jesus who was sometimes acclaimed but who was also despised and rejected on his journey to Calvary.

Have these thoughts in mind as we renew our priestly commitment.

As we do so you will find now that these themes I have talked about, the centrality of the Eucharist, covenant fidelity and sacrifice, are very much to the fore in the wording of our promises.