



From the Archbishop of Southwark

Letter to Priests, Holy Week 2020

'All eyes in the synagogue were fixed on Him.' (Luke 4:21)

My dear brothers in the priesthood of Jesus Christ

Holy Week this year would have been the first time that I celebrated the Chrism Mass with you and for you. Together with the laypeople, deacons, and religious of the Archdiocese, we who exercise the ministerial priesthood would have gathered in St George's Cathedral. During the Eucharistic Sacrifice we would have renewed our priestly promises and blessed the Sacred Oil of Chrism, the Oil of Catechumens, and the Oil of the Sick, for use in our sacramental and liturgical life as the Body of Christ in the Church of Southwark. How I long for that day, once the restrictions are lifted, when the Chrism Mass can be celebrated and we are physically united around the altar.

Our journey to Jerusalem this Holy Week is unlike any we have known before. With our churches temporarily closed, and the Sacred Triduum celebrated without a congregation, we enter the hidden mystery of the cross more deeply. We cannot walk towards Calvary without carrying with us all those affected by the Covid-19 virus. So many nations within our human family are suffering the sickness and loss of their loved ones. Here too, in our own country, people have become unwell, and, sadly, some have lost their lives. How necessary it is that we continue to pray

each day for an end to this pandemic and the hurt and devastation it is causing. May those who are ill be healed and may those who have died rest in peace.

How important, too, that we also pray for everyone working to combat the effects of the Coronavirus – our National Health Service and Emergency Service staff, those in national and local government, all those caring for the weakest and the most vulnerable, and for the key workers who are maintaining vital services. We continue to witness the incredible dedication of countless people in selfless service to those in need.

In this, I am proud of what our parishes and schools are contributing to the common good and the care for others. I think, for example, of engineering students at St Joseph's College in Croydon who have been working in shifts, 24 hours a day, to manufacture life-saving components for the NHS using the College's 3D printer. I think of our hospital and healthcare chaplains who continue to administer the Sacraments to the critically ill and dying. I think of the parish support networks that ensure those who live alone are not forgotten. In so many different ways, we are working together, in the strength of God's grace, to make sure that the very best of our shared humanity triumphs.

The current lockdown has had an impact on our priestly life and ministry. We feel the pain of not being able to gather with our congregations in church for the celebration of the Mass, for baptisms, weddings, and funerals. To not be 'out and about' in our communities, pastorally and spiritually, is so counterintuitive to our priestly instinct. Yet, how necessary it has been, and how essential it is, that we celebrate the Eucharist each day for, and on behalf of, our people. We may be physically distanced, but we remain united in Christ. Many of our churches have been able to live-stream the liturgy and I know this is so greatly appreciated. It is profoundly consoling to our parish communities that we are celebrating the Holy Week liturgies for them, even though

they cannot be with us in church. This is of the utmost supernatural significance for our communion in faith and prayer.

When the Lord Jesus entered the synagogue at Nazara, He was given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Remember that, as He unrolled it, He chose the place from which to read. The text is familiar, and is as true of the Lord Jesus today as it was then. It speaks powerfully of Him and His mission. It also speaks of us and what it means to share in His priesthood.

My brothers, when we were ordained as priests the Spirit of the Lord was poured out upon us, given to us, as an undeserved gift. At our ordination we were changed. We were conformed, heart and soul, to Jesus Christ as His priests. We did not claim this, nor deserve it. We did not earn it, nor achieve it. The priestly office was given to us, entrusted to us, not to be kept to ourselves, but to be placed generously at the service of salvation.

It is right that, in so many ways, we care for the people we encounter, accompanying them, meeting their needs, and helping them cope with whatever life throws at them. As priests, all of this has an origin and an orientation, a source and a purpose. It comes from Christ and is directed towards Christ. Our mission is to enable those we serve to meet Jesus Christ and to come to know and love Him as Lord and Saviour. Sometimes we may do this more implicitly, at other times more explicitly, but the Spirit of the Lord has been given to us so that we might lead others to Christ. Our personal faith, our warm humanity, our gentleness and kindness, our fundamental compassion, are jewels in our priestly crown through which we imitate our Servant King.

The anointing we received at our ordination continues to seep deep within us. The residue of Chrism on our palms has long gone, but we have been marked indelibly and claimed by Christ. His anointing must flow out from us as a blessing to others. As He was anointed and sent, so we must step forward in the confidence of the Good News.

We seek out those in the poverty of doubt and unbelief, in the poverty of earthly riches which lack heavenly wealth, in the material poverty that cries for fairness and our active response. We must have a heart for the imprisoned, for those literally in custody, for those trafficked and tortured, and for those held captive by fear or shame, by guilt or anger. The loving liberty we proclaim always goes hand in hand with divine healing and boundless mercy.

To those who perceive no meaning in life, who cannot 'see' that God loves them, who are unable to love themselves or those around them, we announce the hope we have in the Lord Jesus. To those downtrodden by injustice, those oppressed by forces from within or outside them, we declare that freedom in Christ is real and true. This Easter we recommit ourselves to the victory of Christ over sin and death, to the favour of faith and the power of grace.

My brothers, we can only be the priests needed by our people, by our Church, and by our world, if we keep our eyes fixed firmly on Christ. A cursory glance, a look from afar, a momentary squint, is not enough. No matter how impressive our human skills and strengths, these will only ever take us so far. We must fix our eyes on Him, and on Him crucified, risen, and reigning. Our ministry must flow directly from our daily encounter with the gaze of Christ's love: the consolation of His face in prayer; the intimate union with His heart in the Mass; His presence seen in the least of our brothers and sisters. Fixing our eyes on Christ, and keeping our eyes fixed on Him, is the surest way to fulfil our priestly call. Being with Christ is the prerequisite foundation of labouring for Christ.

In these unusual times, when so much has changed, Christ remains the same, now and always. With our eyes fixed on Him, the liturgy will carry us - and with us, within our hearts, our people - as we commemorate the Lord's saving passion, death and resurrection.

From the bottom of my heart, I want to thank you for serving as a priest in our Archdiocese. Since I became your Archbishop last July I have experienced first-hand your vibrant faith in Christ, your sincere commitment to the Church's mission, and your dedicated service to those within your care. It has been an inspiration to begin to get to know you as we share the responsibility for shepherding Christ's flock in our particular part of the kingdom.

I extend to each of you my heartfelt gratitude. I pray for you, and with you, that, together with our lay faithful, our deacons, and consecrated men and women, we will continue to keep our eyes fixed on Christ as we sing forever of His generous love.

With every blessing for Easter

Yours devotedly in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a cross symbol followed by the initials 'JW' and a flourish.

The Most Reverend John Wilson
Archbishop of Southwark

Please find below the *Personal Renewal of Priestly Commitment* which I invite you to pray in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament on Maundy Thursday evening.

HOLY WEEK 2020

PERSONAL RENEWAL OF PRIESTLY COMMITMENT

In the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, the priest makes the following personal renewal of priestly commitment.

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Lord Jesus Christ, as the Church approaches the anniversary of that day when you conferred your priesthood on the Apostles and on us, I renew now, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, the promises I made on the day of my priestly ordination.

With humility and faith, I (*the priest inserts his name*) resolve to be more united with you and more closely conformed to you, denying myself and confirming those promises about sacred duties towards your Church which, prompted by love of you, I willingly and joyfully pledged on the day I was ordained a priest.

I resolve to be a faithful steward of the divine mysteries in the Holy Eucharist and the other liturgical rites, and to discharge faithfully the sacred office of teaching, following you the Head and Shepherd, not seeking any gain, but moved only by zeal for souls.

Humbly, I ask for an outpouring of the gifts and graces I need for my priestly service, so that, supported by the prayers of the people entrusted to my care, and working with my brother priests, I might remain faithful in my ministry to you, the High Priest, and lead your people in the way of salvation.

I pray for my bishop (*insert the Bishop's name*) that he may be faithful to the apostolic office entrusted to him, so that, in our midst, he may be made, day by day, a living and more perfect image of you, the Priest, the Good Shepherd, the Teacher and Servant of all.

Lord Jesus, graciously keep us all in your love and lead all of us, shepherds and flock, to eternal life. Amen.

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen