



Bishop David Oakley
Homily
Chrism Mass
1st April 2021

Today's Gospel takes us to Nazareth and a familiar moment when Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah. We know from the account of that day, although 'all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him', these were dull eyes and not filled with the light of faith. We may compare this with another time when Jesus reflects upon the fulfilment of this same prophecy of Isaiah, three chapters later in the Gospel. The Baptist sends friends to ask Jesus if he is the one they are waiting for. The Lord tells them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.'

And so, what is promised by the prophet and fulfilled by Jesus in Nazareth, is clearly shown in the unfolding ministry of the Lord. It is this ministry which confirms the ontology. Jesus is the Christ, and we know this through what he is doing.

Over this past year, I sense many have been like the Baptist, locked down in their homes, maybe unsure and searching; what is happening and what does it all mean? Where is the Christ in all of this? We yearn to see the signs of the Kingdom leavening our society, giving new hope. But is it possible, our eyes too may become dull to the unfolding drama of salvation history.

The blessing of the oils of catechumens and of the sick, the consecration of the sacred chrism, are signs of hope within our diocesan community. They point us, not so much towards what we are doing, but to what the Lord is doing still in our midst today.

Amidst all the science and the data, did we ever hear newscasters speak of the many times when priests went into hospitals and care homes to anoint the sick and the dying? And yet in this often-hidden ministry, and with the oil of the sick blessed here today, comfort will

continue to be given to those who are suffering. Those to be baptised into eternal life will be anointed with the oil of catechumens, so that they may receive divine adoption as children of our heavenly Father and 'receiving divine wisdom and power, they may understand more deeply the Gospel of (your) Christ'.

With the consecration of Chrism, those 'born again in the cleansing waters of Baptism, are strengthened by the anointing of the Spirit and, conformed to (your) Christ, they share in his prophetic, priestly and kingly office.' And so, those who have received the new life of baptism, those who will receive the outpouring of the Spirit in sacramental Confirmation, and Deacon Liam Castle who will be ordained priest, all will be anointed with this sacred oil.

Mention of Liam brings me to the second part of my reflection this morning, and so now, a few words for our priests. Our longest serving priest, Fr Neville McClement, has been ordained for sixty-three years and our newest is Fr Andrew Coy, who has just been ordained for a week - we might say the Chrism is still fresh on his hands!

My dear brothers in ministry, there will hopefully be many occasions when we might reflect together on the meaning of priestly life and ministry. And so as we prepare to renew our priestly promises, let me just return to that day in Nazareth.

One of the reasons this day did not end well for our Lord, is that Jesus was so well-known to the townsfolk of Nazareth. Just after today's Gospel passage finishes, the people said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' As the saying goes, familiarity breeds contempt.

Permit me to remind you of some words of Pope Benedict XVI when he came to Birmingham to beatify John Henry Newman: 'Cardinal Newman's motto, *Cor ad cor loquitur*, or "Heart speaks unto heart", gives us an insight into his understanding of the Christian life as a call to holiness, experienced as the profound desire of the human heart to enter into intimate communion with the Heart of God. He reminds us that faithfulness to prayer gradually transforms us into the divine likeness. As he wrote in one of his many fine sermons, "a habit of prayer, the practice of turning to God and the unseen world in every season, in every place, in every emergency – prayer, I say, has what may be called a natural effect in spiritualizing and elevating the soul. A man is no longer what he was before; gradually ... he has imbibed a new set of ideas, and become imbued with fresh principles".'

My dear brothers, if the Lord's heart is to speak to our hearts, then we must seek the Lord in prayer every day. It is always sad when, in the midst of a busy ministry, time with the Lord becomes dispensable. When we cease to pray, we begin to see everything about our ministry with dull eyes. The demands of pastoral care may become an inconvenience, we are reduced to religious functionaries, and sad ones at that.

At our ordination, we have been anointed with nothing less than the spirit of the Lord. But has this spirit become as dry as the remnants of oil in our oil stocks, that is when the oil is not replenished and used?

It is always encouraging to hear of priests, gathering together to spend time with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, to pray the Office together with others, to take time for days of recollection and retreats.

I want to encourage each and every one of us, to rediscover the joy of spending time with the Lord; worn out, weary though we may be, do invest in a good alarm clock. Let it summon you every morning to come before the Blessed Sacrament, to be fed with the words of scripture.

And let us pray for each other. How many times have I sat with the Lord, my soul as dry and as empty as the desert sands, but something has kept me there, and deep within, there is a stirring of hope and new life. Because how often our vocation is saved by the intercession of our brothers.