

The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Chrism Sermon 2016 (Exeter, Bristol, Lichfield Cathedrals)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Why, I wonder, do we celebrate Pentecost in the middle of Holy Week? For that is what this service is about: Pentecost. It's one of those celebrations that echoes a great feast celebrated at some other time of the year. Holy Cross Day gives us a second look at Good Friday. Corpus Christi revisits Maundy Thursday in the light of Easter. We relive the Transfiguration as part of our Lenten fast. And we're doing that *sort of* thing now: this is Pentecost in mid-Holy Week. These celebrations offer us the possibility of going beyond the narrative of an event; they invite us to enter more fully into the mystery of God's work in us.

Pentecost in mid-Holy Week: how so? Our first clue is in the name of today's Mass, and our second will be in the gospel reading we've just heard.

Χρίσμα is an ancient word meaning 'anointing', from which we have our word Χριστός, Christ, 'the anointed one'. The name Jesus Christ means literally 'Jesus Anointed One': he is the Christ (the Anointed) of the Lord God. It is hardly surprising then that already, in the first generations after the apostles, we find that being daubed with oil is becoming the culminating sign of baptism, when, rising from the waters of the font, a person is anointed with the oil, and becomes a Christian, becomes literally 'another Christ'. And today's service is, very practically, a preparation of holy anointing oils for baptisms in a few days' time on Easter Eve and then in the weeks and months that follow it.

But this sign very quickly points us much further. St Irenæus says, 'When we use the name 'Christ', we infer the One who is the *anointer*, the One who is *anointed*, and the *anointing* itself. That is, the Father who *anoints*; the Son who is *anointed*; and the Holy Spirit who is himself the *anointing*.' (*con. Haer.*, iii.18.3) 'Jesus Christ' is Jesus 'Anointed-with-the-Holy-Spirit'.

Our second (and bigger) clue that this is Pentecost in mid-Holy Week is this morning's Gospel. Right through the opening chapters of Luke's gospel, the activity of the Holy Spirit is unavoidable. The Spirit *comes upon* Mary to bring about the birth of Jesus. The Spirit *fills* Elizabeth who recognizes Mary mother of the Lord. The Spirit *fixes* on Jesus at his baptism, *drives him* into the desert to be tempted, and *accompanies him* in power as he begins his ministry (Lk 4.14). So it can be no surprise to us that when Jesus arrives in Nazareth and stands up in the synagogue he quotes words from Isaiah, 'The Lord's spirit *is on me ... anointed me ... to preach good news to the poor*' (Lk 4.18). A small synagogue, in a nowhere town, tucked away in the folds of the hills above the great trade route toward the sea, but the atmosphere when he began to preach was, we're told, electric. Jesus was making an amazing claim. At that time Isaiah's words were considered to be an as yet unfulfilled prophecy of unprecedented blessings in a 'year of the Lord's favour', which an anointed prophet would bring about. 'Today', says Jesus in his homily, 'this scripture has been fulfilled – in your hearing'. I Am He.

This mission of Christ continues over centuries and continents. 'It is a mission, a movement, that starts with the Father and goes forth, in the power of the

Spirit, 'to bring the good news to the poor' (Pope Benedict xvi, 11 Oct 2012) The Church—full of baptized and anointed Christians—is the *instrument* of this work because we are united to him as a body is united to its head. 'As the Father sent me, even so I send you' (Jn 20.21), says the Risen Jesus to his disciples, and breathing upon them, adds, 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (22). So when we consecrate the Chrism oil—which is our main task this morning—we are preparing the anointing oil which will be the *outward sign* of that *inward Gift*: an outward sign that each Christian, anointed with the same Holy Spirit, is 'another Christ' for the *same* task, of bringing the good news to the materially and spiritually poor. Christ gave us this mission; and continues to do so, pouring out his Spirit upon the disciples: the same Spirit who *fixed* upon him, and *remained* in him during all his earthly life, giving him the strength 'to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed' and 'to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord' (Lk 4:18-19).' Chrism is the sign that the *same thing* happens in us. That's what makes this celebration a sign of Pentecostal mission in mid-Holy Week, a sign, to adapt Irenaeus's language, of the Father who *gives*; the Son who is *gifted one*; and the Holy Spirit who is himself the *gift*. Christ's mission is *our* mission, his witness *our* witness, his cost *our* cost, so that more and more people may be gathered into that Body, and may receive that Gift.

And at this point—picking up on the fact that in recent times this has become the occasion at which priestly promises are renewed to the bishop, and before the people - I want to address a particular word to the clergy who are renewing those promises today. I recently heard a great story: the bishop asks a parish priest, 'Father, tell me, how big is your church?' 'Well bishop, when it's completely full, it sleeps seven hundred!' We were not ordained in order that we, or those we serve, should sleep; but *live*!

Let us think for a moment about the Lord's words: 'He has *anointed me to tell ... to announce.*' The same Chrism used at baptisms is also used at ordinations, and other occasions related to priestly ministry, as a sign that the Holy Spirit is upon us to share Christ's mission: anointed in other words to *preach*, to *announce*, to *witness*. It is the *first* task of the priest to be an evangelist, to *tell* the poor the good news and to *gather* them to Christ who will make them rich.

Friends, that same incident in Nazareth didn't end well: Jesus experienced failure almost as soon as he began. They threw his words back in his face. We will experience the same thing. But we must '*revive* in ourselves the burning conviction of Paul who cried out: 'Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel' (*Novo millennio ineunte*, 40). Few moments in your ministry are as important as your preaching. That's why as a small Easter gift I'm giving you all, for your prayer and reflection, a copy of the present pope's advice (from *Evangelii gaudium*) about the homily as a central aspect of your *anointed* task.

The need is great. The good news is for the poor. The poor are waiting, hungry and thirsty for good news. But 'How can they believe if they have not heard? and how can people preach unless they are sent?' But you have been sent.

When people have been gathered to the church, their journey to Christ continues. On their journey towards him we have the astonishing responsibility—for

which we're *anointed*, not just licensed!—to prepare them by our preaching for their union with Christ, first in the eucharist, and then in mission in the world. Jesus says to us, 'He who hears *you*, hears *me*.' With biblical and spiritual illiteracy at an all-time high we must toil to preach and to teach. The Kingdom of God is spread by word of mouth, and acts of love; when it's convenient and when it's not, on our feet, on our knees, in the pulpit, in the confessional, and in the street. I hope we can learn from Pope Francis's words and read them alongside that great handbook of evangelism, Matthew chapter 10: 'What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops!'

To meet present needs—both the needs of the people of God, and the needs of those who are far from the Church—we will have to be immersed in the *Word of God*, immersed in the *Church's tradition and wisdom*, immersed in the *Spirit*, and *work hard* at preaching and making God known so that more and more people may be anointed with *this Chrism* as a sign of God's indwelling Spirit.

That's the fundamental aspect of this Chrism Eucharist: Pentecost in mid-Holy Week. We consecrate today a sign—a sign for all of us—of our immersion in the Anointed One: being *where* he is, being *who* he is, *doing* what he does, standing in mid-stream of his relationship with the Father, and with the world he so greatly loved, to whom be glory, now and in all eternity.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.