

Ebbsfleet Regional Chrism Masses

Bath, Exeter and Lichfield: Holy Week 2018

From the *Song of the Three Young Men*, v.62: 'Bless the Lord, you priests of the Lord, sing praise to him and highly exalt him for ever.'

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

Each year for the past four I have spoken in this celebration about the oils from which this celebration takes its name: oils that are signs of the Holy Spirit's action in our journey of faith. This year I want to speak more directly to the priests and deacons who today also recommit themselves in apostolic service.

It is said (and well said) that this Eucharist reveals, it makes visible, the communion of presbyters as co-workers with their bishop. It is an opportunity to renew among us the *joy* of communion, and to show ourselves ready to *deepen* it. So in this short homily I want to reflect on the *foundations* of this communion.

Before embarking, I want to express my immense gratitude for all of you, for the many signs of *the communion which already flourishes* among us, and for the desire that many of you express for it to become *more fruitful*. I want also to recollect in this moment all the sick or burdened priests I have visited in the last few months, or who have written to me in advance of today, to express my admiration for the great dignity and the spirit of faith with which they live often difficult trials of health, personal opposition, or suffering. And I also think of the priests who died this year, who in their last months *summed up* lives fully offered to the Lord, and no doubt purified by trials.

It is easy for us to forget that today's liturgy — which can seem rather busy with special ceremonies — happens at a *precise moment*. It serves not only as a *preparation* for, but also as an *orientation* to the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Thursday evening, and thus to the whole Paschal Mystery beyond, which is the *true basis* of our communion as priests.

There are these days many motives, positive and negative, for us to cultivate a deeper fraternity. Positively, we want to show that we are ready and committed to the proclamation of faith, the work of prayer, and service within and beyond the Church. There is an increasing desire among us to strengthen friendships, so as to be able to *support* each other in offering to Christ a fuller consecration, and to the Church a less divided self. Less positively perhaps, we look to one-another for greater solidarity both in the face of our society's increasingly cautious or critical attitude to the clergy, and mindful of the scale of its anxieties and divisions. Torn between the sheer variety of activities and expectations, many priests become drained; they take fewer opportunities for the prayerful recollection that would give them new energy and inspiration. Externally stretched and interiorly drained, it is easy to lose the joy of a vocation which feels to be an increasing burden.

But all these reasons, whether positive and negative, are all *external* reasons to seek solidarity. If we entrust our ministries to them for motivation, we will not take the necessary long-term and lasting action. I want you therefore to reflect with me now (and pray with me

through the coming days) on the *true origin* of our communion as presbyters and deacons, a communion in the death, resurrection and glorification of Christ, made present in the Eucharist.

It is the Paschal Mystery that is the ultimate root of our communion — and our spirituality — as priests. We are included in it through the baptism which we share with all our brothers and sisters; and then, by the prayer and the laying-on of the bishop's hands, we are given the grace and authority to *preside* at its celebration in the Eucharist. The eucharistic gathering is the 'Church *simpliciter*': that is, it the Church in its purest, simplest, most *complete* act. In the Eucharist, the Church *draws on* what is deepest in its life, and *lives out* its identity. In it, in other words, the prayer of Christ becomes *our* prayer; the word and gospel of Christ becomes *our* word and gospel; the life and spirit of Christ becomes *our* life and spirit in the sacramental gifts. Our ministry has its culmination in praising God at the head of this assembly which is one in Jesus, who was consecrated with anointing for the life of the world (as our first and third readings reminded us) and is alive in his Church's offering (as our second reminded us). *That* is what gives strength, unity and joy to our ministry. It is by penetrating ever deeper into *that* mystery by our prayer and service, not by strategizing about our institutional problems, that we shall strengthen our presbyteral communion with one another. And if our *communion* with one another is strengthened, then our *mission* is surely strengthened.

It is in relation to this vision of the eucharistic Church as the context of our teaching that the *Scriptures* find their primacy, in the same sense as when the risen Lord lifted the hearts of the Emmaus disciples, he used what was said about him in the Scriptures to prepare them to recognize him in the breaking of the bread and, then, to announce to his brothers the victory of life over death.

The same is true of the personal and contemplative dimensions of our prayer. Both find not only their highpoint but also *fresh resources* in the Eucharist. We ought not to trivialize our weaknesses and difficulties in personal prayer (*see Rom 8.26*): the clergy do not have any special gifts in this area! We all know and experience that prayer is a very hard task, but it is sustained and supported by our eucharistic prayer; and if our personal and contemplative prayer is flagging, it may be at least in part because of a lack of connection to the Eucharist. Priestly spirituality is a eucharistic spirituality. The two realities (both personal prayer and liturgical prayer) must flow into and out of one another, mutually reinforcing.

And so too, all other essential features of the Church. The whole of her vocation to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and our part in it — her proclamation, invitation, catechesis, witness, mission; the various forms of service, closeness to the poor; even issues of discipline and institutional collaboration — all have their centre and goal in the liturgical assembly.

All of this should remind us, then, that the *liturgical* life of the parish must be cultivated by any means possible in the hearts and habits of parish communities. It is crucial that the parish community's sense of *itself*, and the reality of both *mutual* service and *outward-facing* service, should flourish above all in the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist.

Now, in part I have focused our thoughts in this way so as to be able to underline that we who are trying to shape a collective contribution to the Church of England through The Society (and no doubt others also) have a job on our hands. Many varieties of Christian practice are spreading in the world at present in which eucharistic practice is not obviously central, and eucharistic theology is very slender. There are parts of our own Anglican family and our own church in which the

Eucharist appears to have slipped away from its central place. We urgently need to remind ourselves both why and how it is that the Eucharist defines what *kind* of body the Church is. We need to discover *why it is* that some forms of Christianity which are very popular do not have the Eucharist as central to their practice in *any* form, and engage with them. We need to understand and live the Eucharist far deeper ourselves, and to *share* any wisdom that God has given us.

I hope that these few words have helped to recall again, on the brink of the Paschal Triduum, that the *foundation* of our communion as co-workers for the Lord is not in the present strategies of our church life, nor in our response to the difficulties we face, not even in our desire to be better equipped for service, but in the eucharistic assembly celebrating the Paschal Mystery. Today we ask God to *protect* that communion, because its ultimate goal is in the heavenly liturgy, where Christ sits at the right hand of God, towards which we move as pilgrims. *Until* that moment, and *looking to* that moment, our communion in faith, in liturgical and personal prayer, in pastoral service, and in fraternal friendship, will be the support and the comfort of all our perseverance.