

Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Chrism Sermon 2019

I thank God for all of you daily! And so it is good to be here again in this wonderful cathedral as the Church in the See of Ebbsfleet—bishop, priests, deacons and people—is gathered to celebrate the Eucharist, and to bless and consecrate the holy oils which will be used at Easter and beyond. We are in the Dean and Chapter's debt, and yet again offer them our gratitude.

On Good Friday we shall hear these words from the gospel of John: 'Pilate [afraid because of the crowd] went back into the Praetorium and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?"' It was a question about Jesus's deeper origins, his true identity. He wasn't the first to be uneasy. The puzzle surfaces several times in the gospels. People knew exactly where Jesus was from, and his family background. But they scorned his claims to have a heavenly origin, and a heavenly mission (Jn 6.42, 8.23). Each year in this celebration we hear St Luke's account of one such incident in the synagogue at Nazareth. As you can see illustrated in the manuscript on the front of your service paper, Jesus had expounded a prophecy of Isaiah's by relating it to himself, and did so with an authority that went beyond all normal interpretation. The listeners were shocked at his claim to be the one who made sense of the prophecy. Shock led to denial; denial to accusation, and accusation, well, ultimately, back to Pilate's words on Good Friday. What seems to have provoked the opposition was Jesus's sheer sense of liberty to make such a claim, with all the risks it entailed. 'The Spirit of the Lord God has settled on me', Jesus had said—'anointing me with power ... to announce good news, freedom, sight, healing, God's favour'. The Spirit enables me to give life; or rather, the Spirit enables me to give away my life so that others may have it. Elsewhere in the Gospel he says: 'I only do what I see the Father doing ... and do it in the same way.' (Jn 5.19) That is the effect of the Spirit anointing him. We see him giving his entire self in love, without reservation, and apparently without fear. He is prepared to let go of his safety even of his life, so that others may live, and others may experience God as 'the One who gives his life away'.

Now, the whole of the New Testament is full of the implications of Jesus having reached out to us, and put the same Spirit into our hearts — our rather unfree, ungenerous, and pretty risk-averse hearts. But as Christ's disciples, baptised and anointed, we have received the same Spirit, so that—whether we happen to be young or elderly—we too can grow and mature into people who also freely announce to others good news, freedom, sight, healing, God's favour; who also do freely what in Christ we see the Father doing; who also freely give our lives away. That is what the gift of the Spirit means. It's a bit alarming when you wake up to the fact that that (not just simple church-going) is the way of life we have signed up to! what one writer has called 'humanity overwhelmed by the energy of giving'. But the Spirit is the gift that motivates the Church, and shapes all our efforts to deepen Christ's mission in our increasingly bored, confused, and idolatrous culture. We 'all partake of the same Spirit' (1Cor 12.13; Eph 3.6), the same 'energy of giving'.

As Jesus approached his death he chose two particular ways in which to embed this attitude as deeply as possible in the fellowship of his disciples, so that it should become the 'mind' (the DNA) of his Church (Ph 2.5): what theologians call kenosis. They are the inseparable fruit of Maundy Thursday. The first was the act of worship by which Jesus began his passion, giving himself to his disciples, body and blood; and the second was the ministry of those whose authority would lie in obeying

his command to repeat that same act of worship, and base their own lives on its meaning, so that through them the risen Christ would be able for ever to feed ‘all those who would believe through their word’ (Jn 17.20).

All of this lies behind why, for the clergy, there is a tremendous sense of rightness, even home-coming and belonging, in the liturgies of Holy Week, despite all the busyness associated with preparing them. It’s not always obvious that the kind of activities that fill the lives of the parish clergy are very central to what’s outlined in the Ordinal. There’s not much there about school governance, fundraising, organizing pilgrimages, or even stacking chairs! But this week is different; here a ‘still centre’ of priestly ministry is found, something utterly essential. Coming to this Eucharist each year, and to the Mass of the Lord’s Supper, a tremendous sense of affirmation crystallizes—especially for the clergy—‘Yes! this is central, this is our life-giving source. These liturgies, especially the liturgy of Maundy Thursday, are about as close as we can get to the fire, the mystery, of Christ *giving himself* — Christ, never more filled with the energy of giving than on the cross.

For the clergy, these are moments in which we can honestly assess the sincerity of our spirituality, and renew our dedication to being teachers and models as Jesus himself is our teacher and model for humanity. We can seriously ask ourselves before the Lord — Are we letting our actions and God’s actions be so blended together that the energy of God’s self-giving is what defines our ministries as they defined Christ’s? Are God’s Spirit and our spirits winding themselves together (Rm 8.15-16) so that our ministries energise our brothers and sisters to give themselves in worship, witness, and service? Are we as clergy searching together to find ways in which we can resist the persuasions of our culture, and live life in the Spirit as Jesus has given it to us?

The Eucharist is crucial to our hope of ever living such a life, because Christ set the Eucharist right at the centre of ecclesial life—and therefore at the centre of the life of the priest—as the most perfect expression of the his own attitude. ‘No other action of the Church can equal its effectiveness’ (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, 7).

The Eucharist ‘is often called the sacrament of unity: but it is equally the sacrament of mission.’ (*The Sacrament of Unity*, 2001) And the way we celebrate the Eucharist can either generate or undermine the mission of the Church. No worshipping congregation (in a cathedral, a parish or elsewhere) should set about assessing the effectiveness of its mission, without assessing first the effectiveness of the liturgy from which that mission flows, and, dear fathers, the ministry that we each offer as presidents of it. The Eucharist is central to our mission because it is where Christ renews the energy of self-giving in every kind of mission. Therefore I want to propose to you all, clergy and laity, that we take steps together—among the clergy, and in each parish—towards a period of talking, praying and renewing the eucharistic worship and practice of our parishes. The quality, seriousness, prayerfulness and beauty of our celebrations have a direct effect on the strength and attractiveness of that mission.

If the responsibility of presidency in the Eucharist is not central in the life of the priest, then his whole ministry suffers and is emptied, and the mission of the Church suffers. Only when the priest celebrates with authentic, personal and renewed faith does the liturgy transform lives, and shape the life of the priest as the president of the

community. Don't forget, fathers, even when you celebrate the most humble Eucharist, perhaps in churches in a remote village, or in the back street of a deprived community, or on an anonymous arterial urban road, if you celebrate with real attention and with seriousness and conviction, you build the Church and extend the self-giving of the 'Pastor of the pastors' himself, (1Pt 5.4), Jesus Christ!

As I invite you now to renew your priestly commitment, may the prayers of the saints give you inspiration and courage. Let us pray for each other, and for ourselves, that the lives and gifts he has given us may not be misspent on ourselves, for our own gratification or reputation, but given away for his glory and for the good of his Church.