**Homily - Chrism Mass**

You will know that I have spent most of Lent on the road, visiting the Deanery’s of the diocese. I have now taken the road to Penzance and to Poole, and only got lost a couple of times! Thank God for Sat Nav! One joy in those journeys has been to visit each of the parish Church’s, for the first time. It has been a time of many graces not least because I was brought up to believe that if you prayed three Hail Marys in a Church, on your first visit, then you could ask for three graces in return! As I travelled around I always asked for the same three things; I prayed for the priests in that parish, that they deepen a spirit of conversion and holiness, I prayed that the diocese be granted more priestly vocations and, thirdly, I prayed that I not be a burden or an obstacle to the people of the diocese but rather an instrument to help each one discover the friendship of Jesus more deeply. I am still praying for these graces on this day as we gather for this Chrism Mass, one of the most beautiful Liturgy’s of the Church’s year. For here the Church in Plymouth rejoices together - young people, men and women, religious, deacons, priests and Bishop, all together in praise of Our Lord.

An ancient principle of the Church states, *Lex Orandi Lex Credendi* – The law of Praying is the law of believing. So what we experience in the Liturgy manifests to us the faith of the Church. This is something which is made very real for us today at this Chrism Mass. There are two key moments in our Eucharist - the blessing of the oils and the renewal of priestly promises. Each in its own way reveals to us key aspects of our Catholic faith.

I have often thought, “What would these oils tell us if they could speak?” Surely, the oil of catechumens would speak to us of the desire for God, for this oil is given even before the sacrament of baptism. We think of that desire present in those adults who are to receive that glorious sacrament at Easter, and present in the many parents and families who present their children for the sacrament through the year. St Augustine prayed, “You have made us for yourself, Oh Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” We believe every human heart is made for God and, so, desires God – often that is not expressed, or expressed in a desire for other things - for love, for acceptance or for the good things of life. But all of this is ultimately hunger for God. He is at the centre of our very existence, our beginning and our end, Alpha and Omega, as the Book of the Apocalypse says, “the one who is, who was and who is to come ‘the Almighty’”. Only in Him do our hearts find peace.

The oil of the sick reminds us that healing is at the heart of the Church’s life. Arrayed before us is a host of suffering people, those who hunger and thirst, victims of violence, the sick with all their sufferings, their hopes and their moments without hope, the persecuted, the down trodden, the broken hearted. Healing is one of the fundamental tasks entrusted by Jesus to the Church following the example that he gave as he travelled throughout the land healing the sick. As Pope Francis has reminded us the first task of the followers of Jesus is to “tend the wounds, bind up the wounded”. The proclamation of God’s kingdom, of God’s unlimited goodness, must first of all bring healing to broken hearts. As todays readings remind us, we are called:

“To bind up hearts that are broken, to proclaim a year of favour, to comfort those who mourn and to give them……. for mourning robe, the oil of gladness, for despondency, praise.”

We think most especially of those who are on their last journey; what a tremendous privilege it is to accompany them. How we must revere this time in a person’s life as they prepare to pass through death and to stand before the face of the Living God. Always in our society we must resist any attempt to short-circuit this precious journey at the end of somebody’s life, but rather to allow each one the time that God has given and to experience death not as the last failure, but as the opening out of a new future.

And what would the sacred oil of Chrism say to us? What would it teach us? Surely it would remind us of that unity we all share by virtue of the sacraments of baptism and confirmation that we have received. It would keep before us the many young people of our diocese who receive confirmation and who stand on the threshold of adulthood, full of so much hope and a promise to us that the Church does have a future. Chrism would also remind us of the two priests ordained for the priesthood in our diocese in this past year and how essential is the witness of the priest in the life of the Church. To me, it speaks a particularly poignant word, as I am reminded of that day just 2 and a half months ago when the oil of Chrism was poured on my head, a day of special joy, as I was anointed your new Bishop.

Especially today I want, with everyone gathered here, to give thanks for the ministry of our priests. The fact that we renew our priestly promises during this Chrism mass is a sign of the close unity that we share with one another. I have been particularly aware of this as I have travelled around the diocese in these past weeks. It has been truly a joyful season of Lent for me and has stimulated within me a deeper call to conversion, to renew my own love of the Lord. In the words I used at the time of the appointment I spoke of the ‘silent heroism of the priests of this diocese’ which is known around the country. I can now say, from experience, how very true that is. I thank you, brothers, for your faithful service and I pray that I may be worthy of you. I particularly want to thank those priests who because of age or ill health have resigned from Ecclesiastical office and who yet still remain for us so much a sign of humility and generous service. I think if we keep them before our eyes we will know how to live out our own priestly commitment.

I want to encourage all of the priests - and myself included in this - to remain faithful to the sacraments of the Church as means of salvation for ourselves as well as for our people. Most especially I think of the vital place that the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist play in our spiritual journey. I believe we can only be effective minsters of God’s mercy if we ourselves have drunk deeply from the wellspring of His mercy towards us. When we regularly experience the sacrament of Penance then others will be attracted to it, too, and will experience the Lord’s healing and mercy through us.

The Eucharist, the Mass, is of course the centre of our day. At the beginning of each Eucharist we kiss the altar. A wise elderly priest once said to me “Kiss the altar, Mark, as a loving husband would kiss his wife.” This is a very public gesture made in the presence of those gathered for the celebration of the Mass. But it is at the same time an intensely intimate gesture, an act of affection and surrender, an act of love and of trust. Our kissing of the altar is an act of identification proclaiming Christ, embracing him for ourselves and for our parishioners. We kiss the altar as a sign of the Lord himself, partaking of the sacrifice of Calvary and the table of the Last Supper. Everything we do flows from the altar and back to it. Our embrace of the altar is thus a reminder of the day of our ordination when we were totally and irrevocably joined to Christ, He who is our High priest and who makes us who we are.

May Mary, Mother of the Good Shepard, help us to have a heart fashioned after that of her Son so that we may bring good news to the poor, liberty to captives, sight to the blind. May we indeed set the down-trodden free and proclaim a year of favour from the Lord. Amen

Rt Rev Mark O’Toole

Bishop of Plymouth

16th April 2014