

Chrism Mass Worcester Cathedral 2021

2 Cor.3.17-4.12, Luke 22.24-30

'My God my God, why have you forsaken me?!'

Sisters and brothers, this has been a hard hard year. Churches closed. Weddings cancelled. Children bewildered. Old people isolated. And through it all a ravaging sickness that for months we could not prevent or cure. Fear was in every home as life after life was taken. We meet today in Holy Week, and the the cry of so many this year echoed the cry of our Lord.

*'My God my God, why have you forsaken me?!'*

The grief, loss and bereavement on all levels has been huge. As people you have shared all this, along with everyone else. And then you've had to bear others' griefs, seeking to minister without being able to gather, or sing, or share the Eucharist. Sharing hope when inside you might be full of fear. Taking funerals in half empty chapels, masks on faces, experiences sometimes too bleak for words. Thank you for all of that, and for much more besides.

Even Jesus, it seems, felt forsaken. Abandoned. Alone. Those are not feelings to be ashamed of, or to hide away and never give voice to.

In Holy Week of all weeks, we can cast our burdens on Jesus, bring to him burdens of guilt, or failure, bring our sadness, anxiety and regrets to him.

What burdens do you carry today? Think for a moment.

Jesus invites you to lay that burden down, to lay it at the foot of the cross. Perhaps when you come for communion, lay those burdens at his feet. As you open your hands to receive the Body of Christ, let that Body touch and heal you in return.

When I was a Vicar we sometimes used a beautiful Iona chant on Good Friday, at the Veneration of the Cross. It's called 'I will lay my burden down' and people sang it quietly as one by one they came forward and laid a stone or a pebble at the foot of the cross. Often tears would flow. Good liturgy connects us with the living God. Good liturgy heals and converts our soul.

It's so good to be here with you all today, the largest congregation I've been in for over a year! Praise the Lord! It's great to be with you!

As St Paul says today, *'since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.'*

And so much has encouraged me this year: The ways that you've enabled church to still go on, against all the odds. We've connected online in ways we never could have imagined a year ago. Prayers, PCC's, even Synods on Zoom... What joy!

Many have discovered new connections with creation on their doorstep, walking in streets, parks or fields day in day out. I've appreciated times with family and friends more than ever, and as a nation we've noticed the people who are so often ignored. Nurses and health workers became our heroes, cleaners, refuse collectors, bus drivers, shop workers kept the wheels of our lives turning, enabling us to eat and survive. Many caught Covid as a result, often coming from ethnic minority or lower income groups who have been hardest hit, by far, by this pandemic. Somehow we need to take that appreciation beyond clapping on doorsteps to real substantial change as we live out our kingdom values of Justice and Compassion, Freedom and Love.

In today's Gospel there are such important words from Jesus. They let us into a secret about God that we can easily miss. God is humble.

'For I am among you' says Jesus, 'as one who serves.'

Those people in our society who cook and clean and nurse and sweep and toil and sweat. That's where we'll find Jesus.

Jesus is here, but most of the time we don't notice him.

'For I am among you as one who serves.'

In a few moments, lay ministers and clergy will have the chance to renew their vows. What's said about a priest is longer than what is said about a Deacon. And what is said about a Bishop is longer still! But this liturgical inflation can be misleading. Because the foundational order of ministry, the one on which all others depend, is that of the Deacon.

All ministry, lay or ordained, has to find its bedrock in the Diaconal ministry of service, because that's where we find Jesus.

If in our leadership of a congregation, or oversight of Deanery or Diocese we lose hold of this call to service, then in the end we lose touch with our living Lord. 'For I am amongst you as one who serves.' The Fletcher report, out last week, shows the danger of a ministry that wraps itself in authority, power and privilege. Jesus makes clear in today's gospel, 'It is not so among you.'

That's a danger for any bishop of course, so do please pray for me, as I do for you. I have so much to learn about being a Bishop! But above all else I need to learn again how to be a Deacon in this role. As Gregory put it, to learn how best to be a servant of the servants of God.

The two new sacraments for me are Confirmation and Ordination. In a way they define what a Bishop is for: ensuring the good news of Jesus goes forward to generations yet unborn, through making disciples, and ordaining new ministers of word and sacrament.

I've only done one Confirmation so far, but look forward to many more. I'm setting aside some pilgrimage days in the autumn, when I hope to get around as many of your churches as I can. Dominic Melville said that the font in his church had been dry for 12 months. I'd love to come and bless holy water in your font, and ask God's blessing on each church and

its people before I leave. If we're allowed to gather we might renew baptism vows at a church in the evening, and even baptise and confirm if candidates were there.

I was so privileged last year, to ordain several of our deacons and priests, and Chrism oil will be blessed for that purpose today.

We need ministers of word and sacrament, we need vocations to stipendiary and especially non-stipendiary right now if the church is not just to survive, but thrive in every village, every estate, every corner of this land. As the oils are blessed, remember your ordination, your anointing, God's sealing of you with the Holy Spirit.

As Paul said to the Corinthians, 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.'

We are free to live and love and work for the Lord; for

*'It is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, and so we do not lose heart.'* *'We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in us also.'*

We give thanks for his saving love. For the presence amongst us of the one who serves. As Jesus cried on the cross, 'It is finished' ...

It was really just the beginning, as people saw the 'light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.'

We began this sermon with the first words of Psalm 22, Jesus' heart-rending cry from the cross. *'My God, my God why have you forsaken me?'*

As we look beyond Good Friday to Easter Sunday, and a world of health and wholeness; to making disciples and being apostles for the Lord, we close with the last words from that same Psalm:

*'They shall come and make known his salvation, to a people yet unborn. They will declare that He, the Lord, has done all this.'*