

Isaiah said: 'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me', and Jesus said: '... today this scripture has been fulfilled'. Central to our gathering today is the blessing of the oils, for us to use in different ways in our several ministries, and those oils express who we are called to be: we are both an anointed people and an anointing people. We are an oily people. An oily people – what does that mean?

First of all, it means a people who practise mercy: in a world of hurt and pain, we offer the loving service which we have ourselves received from our merciful Lord. For the one lying half-dead on the side of the road, beaten up by thieves, the Good Samaritan pour out oil and wine, in mercy and healing. Oil, in Greek *elaios*, sounds so close to mercy, *eleos*. *Elaios-
eleos*: the Fathers rejoiced in this pun, because it pointed to a deep connection going beyond mere wordplay: Christ our Saviour crosses the road to pour the oil of mercy on us whom he meets on the road, and he tells us to go and do likewise for those we meet.

The oil of the sick, the first oil we shall bless today, is a rich sign of the culture we are called to build together as a diocese: a culture of healing, of care, of warmth, welcome and kindness. Healing is a vital part of our ministry at so many levels. To mention just two: when you collect your vials of oils after this eucharist, you will find information about the appointment of a new network of healing ministry enablers, one in each of our archdeaconries – I am grateful to Irene Nicholls, Suzan Williams, Paul Howard and Allen Bower for agreeing to take on these important roles of encouragement, resourcing and support. And here's another: in May, Becky Richards will be leading a group of pilgrims in a walk from Stafford to London in support of our NHS. As an oily people we want fair and free healthcare for all.

Healing is not only for our individual bodies. Our society is sick with injustice and poverty, and we are called to pour the oil of mercy in acts of kindness on those in need, who are all around us, and who are among us, not different from us. Last year was declared by Pope Francis to be a Year of Mercy; but that does not mean this year we can all go around being callous. I am deeply impressed by the very many ways in which our churches do reach out in loving service to so many – foodbanks, dementia enablers, welcome for asylum seekers, places of welcome, and myriad other ways showing we are here to serve in a world of need. And this is not just a matter of facing outwards: it is also learning about how to serve one another within the wounded body of Christ, anointing our relationships with one another with the oil of kindness, particularly when we disagree with one another. Whether it is over a deep-seated theological issue, or because X moved Y's flower arrangement (15 years ago) disagreeing with one another in a way that is kind, careful and respectful is a real challenge to our discipleship: but we can do it, and we must, if we are to be a healed and a healing people.

And why do we bother with all this? Why take the effort to show mercy and kindness in a harsh and brutal world? It is not because we are nice people, but because God has shown us mercy of a depth we could not have imagined. In Jesus, he loves us so much that he gives his beloved Son to suffer and to die for us. At the start of these most holy three days of our year, our lives are renewed as look on that supreme picture of mercy pinned to the tree, and the healing Spirit that flows from Jesus' pierced side is shed abroad in our hearts.

We look on that picture: and here's the second point. In the ancient world, the same oil that was used for healing was also used to paint pictures. Doctors and artists belonged together: they were oily people. That is why the Luke the beloved physician is also honoured as Luke the portrait painter. According to tradition, Luke painted an icon of the Blessed Virgin; and in scripture his gospel is the one which paints the fullest picture of the human character of Jesus of Nazareth. That picture of our Lord shows us the image and likeness of God. We share in the image in which all have been created; but in us the likeness has been defaced by sin. In Jesus, we see the full portrait of humanity whose image is restored to the likeness of God: we look at him, and we see: this is what human beings are meant to look like as they mirror God.

But then, God says, you're not just meant to look at my Son: I am going to transform you into his likeness, as my daughters and sons. The oil of catechumens, the second oil we bless today, is the sign of this baptismal transformation of our lives: God through his Spirit is wiping away from our lives the disfigurement and ugliness of sin, as he paints us into a portrait of loveliness. That might seem a far-fetched thing to say, but actually from where I stand, up here, you do look lovely, people of Lichfield – I can see how you do begin to mirror what a transformed humanity is meant to look like together, and it is an attractive picture.

This portrait is so attractive because everybody has a place in it: everybody has right to be painted into the picture – old and young, black and white, deaf and hearing, women and men, straight and gay, able-bodied and differently abled, poor and rich, cradle Christians and new converts, people of different theological traditions and convictions, of differing educational backgrounds – everybody belongs in the picture. That in any case is what the picture should look like; it is what we call nowadays mutual flourishing, and we know that is not easy: the picture needs a constant work of restoration and renewal. But the more we look like that, the more inviting, even compelling, the picture becomes. People will look at it, and think, 'I would like to be part of that picture, I want to find my place among this people'.

So we become a community of invitation: come, join the picture we say – or, in our own local dialect, 'Come, follow Christ in the footsteps of St Chad'. Our journey begins here, in this Cathedral, on Saturday 20th May – details in the cards on your seats; they are not for sitting on, or turning into shopping lists, but as invitations. And there's another card, a yellow one, as a reminder that one of the first things we do together in our new direction of travel is to join in the season of prayer *Thy Kingdom Come*, with local events across our churches and communities, and a beacon gathering here in the Cathedral on the afternoon of Pentecost.

Now, what does it feel like to say yes to the invitation to be part of God's picture of restored humanity? Here's the third and crowning bit of oiliness: it feels like, it is, a joyful, wonderful thing to follow Jesus as Lord. We are those anointed with the oil of gladness: the fragrant chrism, which marks out Jesus as the Christ (*Chrism, Christ, Christian* all being from the same verb), which is poured out on the Christian people as we follow in his footsteps. This anointing transforms our lives and fills us with gladness.

We are about to enter the three-day drama and trauma of the Christ's passion and death, but we know that on the far side of that, on Sunday evening, there waits for us that wondrous walk along the road to Emmaus, where dejection, resentment, anxiety and disillusion are turned around through an encounter with the risen Lord, who meets his people as a stranger on the road and makes himself known in the breaking of the bread. Like those travellers, our hearts burn within us as walk along that road, on fire with the joy and hope that being disciples of Jesus Christ brings into our lives.

Of course, we don't always feel like that, and certainly we are not meant to go around with fixed rictus grins, which are just annoying and off-putting. We live in a tough world, often our lives are tough, and it's a tough time to be a Christian. It's not an easy option to be a disciple of Christ (nobody ever said it would be) but it is a glad and joyful way to live. In a world marked by anxiety and despair we are to be signs of rejoicing and encouragement.

So, here we are, together as the family of God in this diocese, God's oily people: in a harsh world serving our neighbours and one another; to a disfigured world inviting people to put themselves into a picture of what humanity could look like; into a disillusioned world breathing hope and joy. We can only do these things, we can only be this people, because of the working among us of the life-giving Spirit which is poured upon us from the Crucified One – the One to whose pierced side we look in these holy days, the One to whom we owe everything, the One who died for us and now lives for us. To him be glory for ever and ever.