

Receive the faith afresh

Chrism Mass – Lichfield Cathedral, 18.04.19

What an extraordinary Holy Week this has been already. People, old and young, have been kneeling down and weeping in the streets of the city; they have been singing hymns and psalms in the streets of the city; they have been praying in the streets of the city. And the city where all this has been happening is not Jerusalem, where they are quite used to that sort of thing going on; no, it is Paris – secular, stylish, uber-*chic* Paris.

And that this should happen just at this time of year – Isabelle Hamley, Archbishop Justin's chaplain, who is French, sees echoes of the prophecy Jesus made at the start of this holy week: 'France has tried very hard to push God away, and forget the faith of centuries. But when the people fell silent, the very stones cried out.' The very stones cried out. If you have seen that photograph taken inside Notre Dame on Tuesday morning, a smoking pile of debris and devastation, but with the morning sunlight of a new day illuminating the golden crucifix, then you will know how powerful that message is. Jesus' cross still speaks today of the triumph of life, hope and healing over despair, destruction and death. And all this in Notre Dame, the church of Our Lady the mother of Jesus: her soul was pierced at the passion by the sword of suffering, yet she was to share in the joy of the resurrection, in the coming of the Spirit.

Listening to what people in Paris have been saying over the past three days, the message seems to be something like this: until it was taken away, we did not realise what we had among us; we took for granted this extraordinary gift of a holy place; most of us hardly ever went inside it, except when we were showing friends and visitors the sites of Paris; but now that we have nearly lost it, we realise what a treasure it is. And you can also hear the struggle to find the right words to describe the building – great tourist attraction; wonderful heritage building; symbol of Frenchness; and some manage to say, ‘house of God’.

Across Europe, across this country, we have all been deeply affected by this event. Tonight in this Cathedral, as in cathedrals and churches throughout Britain, our bells will be rung in memory and in thanksgiving for Notre Dame; and our prayer must be, that the people of Paris, the people of France, all of us learn to receive back this great gift of God in a new and fresh way.

Taking for granted a priceless treasure entrusted to us, and learning to receive the gift in a new and fresh way—these are themes that run through our gospel reading this morning; they run through our celebration of Holy Week and Easter; and they run through the mission and the ministries entrusted to us in this diocese – ministries which we will soon be affirming, both in our spoken recommitment and in the sign of the holy oils.

Luke describes how, in the synagogue at Nazareth, where he had been brought up, Jesus is handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah to read. What is being passed to him is the scriptural inheritance of his people Israel, a treasury of guidance and wisdom all too familiar to the community in Nazareth. They have become so accustomed to the regular reading of the scrolls that on some sabbaths perhaps they take the message for granted. Well, not on this day they do not: in the words of grace from the young rabbi's mouth, the prophetic word becomes alive and active in their own time and place. They are asked to receive it in a new and fresh way – a challenge which is too much for them.

This is what can and should happen to us in the next few days as we enter this holiest of all times, the celebration of the paschal mystery. As we walk again with Jesus on his journey to the cross, the grave, and into the new life, the words and actions may be familiar to us from many years of discipleship. But let us not take them for granted; let us receive them in a new and fresh way, so that we will feel our hearts being strangely warmed when we meet him on the third day in the opening of the scriptures and the breaking of the bread.

As we are about to enter into this great time of renewal, we have gathered together to commit ourselves afresh to mission and ministry in this diocese, and so often we take for granted what we have received here.

We often take for granted our presence across this diocese. We may not have buildings quite as stunning as Notre Dame (though this cathedral has a quiet and inviting beauty all its own) but we do have 580 churches across Staffordshire, North Shropshire and the Black Country. Sometimes the care of those buildings can feel burdensome to us, but very often they are loved by the communities we serve – though that may only become apparent when, as with Notre Dame, there is danger of losing them. And not only churches: in our schools, chaplaincies and Fresh Expressions; in our involvement in food banks, playgroups, places of welcome, and countless other neighbourhood projects; in the everyday witness of thousands of Christians working to serve their neighbours, we have a deep and wide presence in our communities. And the evidence says that people mostly like having us around, more than they sometimes realise, more than we realise.

Here is a great opportunity to share the love of our God, who loves us so much that he comes to share our life – the everyday life of ordinary people, because he likes being around people like us and ours. Sometimes we get worried by the word ‘evangelism’; we think it’s a special technique we have to master, or a product we have to sell which nobody wants; we feel we don’t have the equipment or the training to do it. But we do: we are in every place, and people mostly like us; we need to see and value our presence in a new way.

Beyond, behind, beneath our physical presence in our communities, there are the spiritual gifts which are entrusted to us. Like the people in Jesus' synagogue at Nazareth, we have the treasures of God's scriptures given for our instruction and learning; like the twelve who sat with him at that first supper this evening, we have the life-giving sacraments of his body and blood to be our food and drink; like those who have walked his way over the centuries, we have the ageless riches of the church's living tradition to influence and inspire us in our discipleship – and, guess what, in this diocese we are particularly blessed in having the wonderfully appealing and inviting example of our first bishop to shape our witness. In case I have not mentioned him before, his name was Chad, and he was a good thing.

And we often take much of this for granted. We think we pretty much know it all, we feel we don't have much to learn, we reckon we've had enough holy communion to last a good while yet, we're a bit tired of praying, and so on. These are attitudes which can infect any of us, and they are particularly dangerous for those of us for whom the Christian religion is our professional way of life; it is easy for us to treat it as a job, and occasionally get a bit bored with it. So, to all of us who are committing afresh to a particular ministry this morning: remember the treasures and the responsibilities entrusted to us; and to all whom we seek to serve: pray for us, that we may be kept fresh in the Lord's service.

And at the heart of it all, beyond, behind, beneath the spiritual gifts, there is the great giver himself, Jesus our Lord. He is the one who brings God's love to us; the one who loves us so much that he not only shares our life but also shares our death; indeed he knows a death worse than any we can ever know, out of love for us. Sometimes we even take him for granted, but let's not do that today or in the next three days.

We're about to live again the greatest story ever told, or that ever can be told. Not only is that story unparalleled in its emotional depth, in the way it has touched the hearts of billions of people through the ages, in the art, the music, the devotion, the changed lives it has given birth to. There is one more thing about this story that means we can never take it for granted: this story is true. It is true: there is a God, who made, knows and loves you and me. That God has come among us in Jesus of Nazareth. He lived among us, he died for us, and he has been raised from the dead as we will be. This is not a bright idea we have thought up, or a set of opinions that rather appeal to us. This is the truth as we have received it, the truth which we are to pass on to those who come after us. We're going to receive the holy oils as the visible, tangible signs of our commitment to this truth, which heals our wounds, which sets us free from sin, which celebrates the joy we know in Christ. As we receive these oils, let's also receive our faith in a new and fresh way: because our faith is true.