

Chrism Mass 2008 - Chelmsford Cathedral

The Right Reverend Dr Laurie Green, Bishop of Bradwell

*"We break this bread to share in the body of Christ.
Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread."*

We gather as one body on this day when our Lord gave us this eucharist of bread and wine. And, in the midst of this sacrament of unity, we are to bless oils for healing & baptism.

The blessing of oils in the Chrism Mass is an exquisitely early rite first described in the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus in the Year of our Lord 215.

The Maundy Thursday renewal of vows, however, dates back only to when I was a young man - and that was not in the time of Hippolytus. I was in my late teens when there was a mass exodus of traditionalist priests and lay people from the Roman Catholic Church. They could not stand the modernising that the bishops of the recent international Vatican Council had decided upon. The Pope therefore suggested that we all be brought back to our vocational roots on this day in order to underline our unity amidst our differences.

The Church of England has never been ashamed to pinch a good idea from anywhere, and so incorporated the new rite of renewal of vows into our own Lenten calendar.

And this renewal, for laity as well as the ordained, goes well with the blessing of oils in this present time, for the oil of healing and refreshment was never more needed than now for a broken world and a disunited church. Today's disunity in the Church is no longer just of academic concern. We're feeling the distress of it quite personally. I hear people saying, "Other so-called Christians don't even believe in the same God I believe in." I've said it myself - "This is not the same Church I joined when I first made my ordination vows." But of course the truth is that this is the very same church which I joined years ago - it's just that I never knew just how diverse it is. I never even thought of myself as Anglican - I was just 'Church of England'.

I never knew that around the other side of the world, God had Anglican children who thought it was perfectly Christian to have two or more wives, or that the bible said you could oppress black people or deny women their rights. I never needed to know about all these challenging differences. But God always knew the church was like that - and God knows it still is. We're only now finding out - with the advent of international communication and ease of travel - that people really don't think the way we do - and yet call themselves Christians - even 'Anglican' Christians. And what a challenge it's turned out to be! Does this really mean that those gun-toting Americans of the bible-belt who shout "Kill a commie for Christ", are my Christian brothers and sisters? And if you can find it in your heart to link arms with groups like that, I'm sure I can hand pick just for you a group of Christians from around the world who would bring you up sharp.

Our Diocesan Synod was recently reminded of the Hebrew story about King David. He wished to make a thank offering to God. He looked for a site to build his altar and chose the threshing-floor of Araunah the Jebusite. "My King," said Araunah, "let me give you the land to build your altar." "No," said the king to Araunah, "I shall give you a price for it; I will not offer Yahweh my God burnt offerings which have cost me nothing." In today's globalised world, when we at last know that there are Christians who believe in things we find repugnant, we no longer live in a world where unity will cost us nothing. To make an offering to our God of our unity, here in this Cathedral today, it will cost us. Unity is easy for the authoritarian or imperialist: demanding that all be united around what they themselves believe. But that is no worthy offering.

To realise first, that we have deep differences. And then to acknowledge that those differences are important - differences to be treasured. And then to be prepared to sacrifice these treasures on the altar of our unity in Christ - now, that will be a worthy offering - worthy, because it will cost us. King David said, "I will pay a price for it. I will not offer Yahweh my God offerings which have cost me nothing." To acknowledge heart-felt differences and still love one another and covenant to work together? An offering indeed!

Christ Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane struggling to offer his sacrifice. The name 'Gethsemane' means 'The Oil Press'. It was the place where the most precious olives were thrown together into a heap and squeezed until they gave up their precious juices - the oil for anointing. In Gethsemane, precious Jesus being squeezed, under pressure, for your sake and for mine.

But how far can we be squeezed? Under pressure I find myself arguing, "isn't truth more important than unity?" To stand for what is correct even if it breaks our togetherness? Isn't that a nobler way? But as I ponder the words of Jesus in those last precious and pressured days of his earthly life I am led to wonder - am I not mistaken? - Is not unity itself a truth? I see Jesus sacrificing himself to bring me into relationship - into unity with God and my neighbour. For Jesus, truth is a relationship. Truth is the unity which holds together all our struggling differences. Truth is a family of differences - a family. And I know myself to be in his one family of different and conflicting children whom he cherishes with equal and undivided love.

And isn't an awareness of that fact the genius of Anglicanism? To know that I am not saved by my own opinions, or even our opinions, but by God's gracious gift of unity across our diversity. To be an Anglican one has to be courageous. You priests and deacons who sit here now, you who bring immense and varied gifts to your ministry and offer them week in and week out, you have the courage and grace to love even in what can sometimes be trying situations - I know this. You bring healing to a broken world. And we all here, laity and ordained alike, thank God for you - courageous Anglicans.

And we do so, knowing that not everyone will have what it takes to be a real Anglican. They argue like good Anglicans, but then they don't stay in the family. Perhaps it's not their vocation. But for us, 21st century globalised Anglicans, togetherness in diversity is our vocation, our calling. It is our anointing.

Jesus does not offer his God anything that has cost him nothing. He kneels in the oil press of Gethsemane, sweating blood, anointed with his own blood, trying to hold it all together. He has just walked from an upper room, where he made his offering of bread and wine to his friend Judas. Offered to be in communion with his betrayer. And the Lord is here, bidding his disciples again to love one another even that much. To lay down the burden of the truths we have made for ourselves, those that we have so heavily treasured, in order to be anointed together with the oil of gladness.

The Oil of Exorcism, driving out those old ghosts of arrogance and self-justifying opinion. The Oil of Healing, binding up the wounds and scars of old battles. The Oil of Chrism, conditioning us as athletes for the challenges of the race together. How we need that anointing. And Jesus, the anointed Christ, there in the threshing floor, there in the Oil Press of Gethsemane, saying, "Not my will, but thine." And we echo: "Not my opinion, but thine," "not my church, but thine," "not my priesthood, but thine." "Not my little truth, but your truth which says, "You see what I have done for you? Then you also must wash one another's feet."

Let us not offer to God an offering which costs us nothing. For the truth is neither my opinion nor yours, but the truth is the divine space that God gives us within which we can struggle and disagree, whilst yet always knowing that, "we who are many are one body, for we all share one bread." AMEN.