

Chrism Eucharist – Liverpool Cathedral

On behalf of Bishop Paul and myself, I want to say a very big thank you to all who minister in this Diocese. We want you to know that our own ministry is only made possible by the dedication and devotion of our colleagues, lay and ordained, – and we do not take that for granted.

One of the greatest gifts God gives us in this life is one another. Together we walk through the years, learning to listen and scold, to encourage and forgive; learning to give and accept, to protect and to let go; learning the responsibility of helping those dependent on us and the humility of enforced and unwelcome dependence upon others.

Africans speak of a word, **Ubuntu** which means, in essence, ***I am because you are*** which tells us that we only really exist in relationship with one another. Another way of putting it is to say ***I need you in order to be me***. And we need Jesus in order to be ourselves together. That's what makes the church different from any other community – because we gather around not just a common purpose, but around a person, the Living God.

This God calls us to live in such a way that we bring out life in one another. It continues with each of us being willing to give of our deepest selves that others might find life.

The Letter of James speaks of the joyful power given to Christians in the name of Jesus: "pray for one another, so that you may be healed" (v5). We have been given a share of God's saving and healing power. James suggests that it is through praying for the sick, searching for the lost, living in close and truthful community with God's people that we know what we are doing and why. It is in that pastoral ministry that we share in God's great mission – please note whose mission it is – to bring his people out of the slavery of sin and death, and into his glorious kingdom.

The letter of James links prayers for wholeness with confession to one another. Of what might we, corporately, repent? I think it is a sin that has found currency again centuries after it was rejected by the Church as heresy: I refer to Pelagianism – the name given to the belief that we are able to achieve salvation through our own endeavours? St Augustine, who spent the last 20 years of his life arguing against Pelagianism, reminded the Church that all depended, not on effort but on grace. We do not become good ministers simply by trying harder.

As ministers, we have to be careful that we do not become like the Pharisees and see the practice of religion as an end in itself. The whole idea of being a Christian in ministry implies the response to a call – we must go on listening to God's voice. So before we set about going into action for God, we must first listen to Him, to know that we are doing His will and not responding to our own anxieties. A life in ministry is directed at listening to the voice of the one who calls. And He who calls is faithful.

It is worth spending a few moments thinking about the old monastic injunction *vacare Deo*, to make space for God. The Cistercians called it *otium sanctum*, holy leisure, which St Bernard characterised as "very busy leisure".

How do we make space for God in our lives? What kind of sacred leisure should our lives contain? "Making space" is not the same as "doing nothing". Doing nothing worried St Benedict, for example, who saw it as idleness and the enemy of the soul. Making space for God, by contrast, is more a change of gear, adopting a slightly different focus. We make space for God by attending to Him.

It is a challenge to know ourselves as well as God does. That is, in part, because most of us have moments when we wish we were other than ourselves. Stripped of our masks and pretence and all that we have accumulated to clothe us, standing naked before God, many of us know we are not a pretty sight. But it is in this state of vulnerability that we come closest to our vulnerable Saviour on the cross. Vulnerability is an attribute of God; success is not. So take comfort from the words of the late Quentin Crisp: "If at first you don't succeed, failure may be your style."

So do not take yourselves too seriously – I am reminded of that wonderful Jonathan Miller sketch in which the Vicar says: "Just call me Dick because that's the sort of person I am."

Our serious, anxious world is in need of jesters that enable us to laugh at our failures and encourage us to get up again, and start all over again. Laughter can be the voice of faith, a rumour of angels. Dante, when he finally arrives in Paradise after all his trials and tribulations, hears the laughter of angels praising the Trinity. According to Dante, in Hell there is no hope and no laughter; in purgatory there is hope but no laughter; but in Heaven there is no need of hope, so laughter reigns. Laughter is hope's last word – it is the song of the Angels in heaven.

We cannot laugh if we are consumed by anxiety. I am comforted by the words of C S Lewis that "God is so much bigger on the inside than on the outside". May our Diocese be as capacious as God himself so that we do not shrink His majesty into the narrow confines of a club. May we, in our ministries, be willing to give sufficient space to allow the Holy Spirit to breathe life into each other as we go about God's mission in our Diocese.

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