



## HOMILY FOR THE MASS OF CHRISM 2023

Saint Barnabas Cathedral,, Nottingham  
Bishop Patrick McKinney

The scripture readings for our Mass today focus very much on the action of anointing. In the Old Testament, anointing was very much a sign of being taken into God's service; it was never a question of being endowed with status and earthly power. In the gospel we have just listened to, the words and actions of Jesus in his own home town Synagogue make clear that the prophecy of the anointed one, the one who was to come, is realised in Him; He is God's Anointed One; all his actions are entirely at the service of the Father's mission, to bring good news to the poor, to set free those held captive, to give new sight to the blind. He does not cling to equality with God; he does not seek himself, but rather he lives for the One who sent him. So too, in our own time, those anointed to serve in the Church, those called to ministry of any kind in the Church, are taken into God's service. Our ministry is not something that derives from us; it comes from our anointing with the oil of the Holy Spirit. We become ministers of the Holy Spirit in the measure in which we follow the path of Jesus whom, especially this Holy Week, we honour as God's Anointed One, who emptied himself in loving service of others.

Today it's appropriate to recall that each one of us here, laity, religious and clergy have been anointed; we've all been anointed with the oil of catechumens and the oil of Chrism in the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. Each one of us has, in some way, been taken into God's service, into the life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in our baptism. We each now share in the life and mission of Christ himself. We too are sent to carry out the Father's will in our words and actions. The gift of the Holy Spirit, both in Baptism and Confirmation, equips us for the life of Christian discipleship, with all the challenges, opposition or indifference that it can bring. Our anointing instils in us the gift of hope, the supernatural virtue, by which the things of this world are seen in their true perspective. So we learn not to be despondent when people do not understand us, or the moral principles we strive, as Catholics, to live our lives by. Rather, we remain steadfast in holding on to the promise of the Lord, 'I will be with you always', and we place our trust in the way the Holy Spirit empowers us in the daily living out of our Christian faith. We know that all who are anointed

are called to be men and women of compassion and care, after the example of Jesus and, even if at times we fail through our human weakness, the mark of God's loving care and ownership of us remains forever. We may be unfaithful at times, He is always faithful. In a few moments you will witness the priests here renewing their ordination promises; it's the renewal and deepening, if you like, of the initial openness of each priest to the power and effectiveness of his anointing in ordination. I would like to invite each of you, at some point in this Mass, to renew in silent prayer the anointing you received in baptism and confirmation; open your hearts afresh to the power of the Holy Spirit given to you in those sacraments; that he may embolden you today with renewed courage, faithfulness and hope, in your witness to Christ, in your sharing in the Church's mission. Thank you for your lives of faith, for your love and commitment to the crucified and Risen Christ; your lives of faith lived out do so much to encourage and inspire your priests and me, your bishop. Thank you.

My dear brothers, as the years go by in the living out of my own priestly, and now episcopal, ministry, it's the image of God as the Master Potter that that I increasingly find myself reflecting upon. Maybe it's the same for you? I find very powerful, and yet comforting, the image of God as the Master Potter; the one who first fashioned each of us in his own image and likeness, and who then called and shaped us to share in the priestly ministry of his Son. I now find that I need, more than ever, to allow Him, the Master Potter, to take me in his hands to repair and refashion me, as I grow in greater awareness of how I am but a frail and sinful instrument of the Lord, but one whom he has, nevertheless, personally called into his service. Like you, I have come to realise that the Master Potter loves us as we are, so often far from being the finished article, and then He looks to us to open our hearts to him in prayer each day, placing our ministry in his hands, with trust and hope in him, so that he can constantly shape and reshape each of us into the priests he wants us to become. St Paul, who knew a thing or two about having his life, his heart, and his way of thinking, completely refashioned by Christ, uses that very helpful image of us being earthenware jars. He says, 'we are only the earthenware jars that hold this treasure, to make it clear that such an overwhelming power comes from God and not from us' (2Cor 4:7). In the grace of our ordination, and in the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit in our anointing, we were indeed given an 'overwhelming power', but yet, as well we know, we remain forever 'earthenware jars', jars which are weak and fragile and which, therefore, can so easily become chipped, cracked or indeed broken. I find this a most striking, and comforting, image of our human weakness and fragility as Christ's priests, but priests who are always held in the hands of the Master Potter.

The oil of Chrism, the outward sign of the 'overwhelming power' received at our ordination does not, as we know from our own experience of priesthood, remove our human frailty; and that fact should not discourage any of us who continue to struggle with our weaknesses, and it should not discourage any young men who may be trying to discern whether God is calling them to priesthood, and who may be anxious about their weaknesses. As St Paul

reminds us, it is always the treasure we carry within us that matters, not the weak or broken vessel that strives to be at God's service. God never withdraws that treasure, that grace given at ordination, even when the earthenware jar may at times in our lives, become chipped or cracked; but rather He, the Master Potter, patiently waits for us to place ourselves once more in his hands, so that he can restore, reshape, and make us fit once more to serve his purpose. It is only when we can recognise, and even rejoice in, our human limitations, and then spend time with the Master Potter in times of Adoration, in receiving often the healing and strengthening Sacrament of Reconciliation, in acknowledging our total dependency upon our Master, that God's grace can continue to complete what is lacking in us.

This is why it's so important that we are never tempted to despair about our weaknesses, but rather that we gladly acknowledge the truth that sustains us: God frequently makes positive use of our weaknesses. None us, my brother priests, has been chosen to serve as Christ's priests because we are better than anyone else, or because we are more spiritually advanced; we are not; we are sinners like everyone else. But equally, let us never forget that we are His priests, because He has chosen us to be so, and he has given us this ministry of service for the good of the whole church. His grace can and does shine out through our weaknesses. I know this in my own life, and so will each of you. It's therefore in that spirit of humility, of openness to allowing the Master Potter to refashion us for this new year of priestly ministry, that we now prepare to renew our ordination promises. We do so, relying utterly on many things: the love and mercy of God, the inspiring help of the Holy Spirit, the grace-filled ways in which the Lord has worked effectively through us this past year, the brotherly support of each other, which is so essential, and the generous prayers for us of the people we serve.

My dear brothers you are always in my prayers, each and every day and, in spite of my own inadequacies at demonstrating this, I greatly value and appreciate your ministry as my brother priests and closest collaborators in the mission given to us in this part of the Lord's vineyard. Thank you for your faithfulness and dedication to your ministry, in good times and in difficult moments; thank you also for your friendship and support you offer each other, and me, which helps us all to keep us going; thank you also for the ways in which you faithfully minister God's love, joy, care, healing and forgiveness to those in your priestly care. As we look to the future, I ask you to pray particularly for our seminarian at Oscott, Michael Furey, for Cameron and Lukas who will begin their propaedeutic year at Valladolid in September, and for Keith Hannah who will be ordained a Permanent Deacon that same month. As we now renew the promises of our ordination, let us rejoice in knowing that the life and future of the Church, of our diocese and our ministry, is in the hands of God the Master Potter, and not ours. Let us offer him now, in a moment of quiet prayer, our empty hands for the fulfilment of his purposes and not ours.