

Diocesan Chrism Eucharist

Maundy Thursday

readings: [James 5.13-16a](#), [Luke 4.16-21](#)

14 April 2022

Maundy Thursday – today is a solemn day, in a difficult time.

By contrast in our liturgy we celebrate God's good gifts in ministry, by blessing the oils, symbols of a joyful ministry.

God has anointed you with the oil of gladnessthe Psalmist's words to the King, God's anointed. The oil of gladness. What is this about?

I think back to collective worship in a primary school when the brave deputy head, a great cheerful rumbustuous character, was willing to help out by allowing oil to be poured over his head and long ginger beard, as he played the part of Aaron in Psalm 133.

'How good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity – it is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.....'

His readiness to step forward, his sense of fun, and the laughter that ensued brought us all together. The best sort of comedy does just that.

As a chorister I learned that laughter is the same if you try to suppress it – it is very hard to keep it in. It explodes in snorts and deep embarrassment.

So with oil, we are talking about something uncontainable, something immeasurable, without limits. A year ago today what seemed like a bucketful of oil was poured out on my head as I was ordained bishop. One of the lawyers present had to go off in search of a cloth to stop it going everywhere. But the love of God in the end does get everywhere – and, thank God, there's nothing we can do that will in the end prevent that!

No - 'For thine is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory, for ever and ever.' Graham Greene's novel 'The Power and the Glory' tells of a priest, seriously dysfunctional, alcoholic and reluctant, whose many failures do not prevent God from using him to bring hope to others. There's hope in that for all of us – hope for me. Yes, as we enter his passion, we know that in Christ, through Christ, love wins through. It may be costly, but Love wins!

All well and good, you may say, but actually, oil runs out. That is our experience now - at the fuel pumps, and in the cupboard too. The oil was running out for the widow at Zarephath until Elijah came along and made the promise to her that there would be enough oil and meal to keep her going until the shortages were over.

The best we can bring today is our empty containers – we bring our emptiness. We may well feel, this year, that in more ways than one, the oil is running low.

The oil of inspiration. The oil of evangelisation. The oil of agility or energy. The oil of transformation. The oil of joy and gladness. Let us come then, and receive God's promise. We bring our emptiness. We renew our commitments in Christ's service today as lay ministers, readers, deacons, priests, bishops – but that means nothing at all unless we are being drenched afresh with the oil of gladness, with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Come Holy Spirit! Fill us anew!

It was good to be reminded, thinking about today, of the significance of the three oils, symbols of God's grace. Oil for the Catechumens, Chrism oil, and Oil for the anointing of the sick.

a. Apparently Gregory the Great associated this oil for catechumens – that is those learning to be Jesus' disciples – (your Alpha course perhaps?) – with the oil that a wrestler would cover himself with before a fight, to make it hard for his opponent to get a grip on him.

In a way we continue lifelong as catechumens, disciples - always needing this protection as we wrestle with self deception or other kinds of temptation. May these things never be able to take hold of us. May we shake free - to love and serve as God's children!

Yes, this oil of the catechumens, whether or not, or however we use it – stands for the ministry we all share as ministers, lay and ordained, of helping people resist evil and get to grips with the good news of God in Jesus Christ, and grow in faith, hope, and love. Let this be a joy to us – it is one of the best bits of the mission of God that we share. Not least because of the joy it gives to the angels in heaven, over any one of us who turns to God.

Yes there is abundant joy in the overflow of the oil of God's love, spilling over into our lives, our homes, our communities. Like the joy of Messy Church – where the mess gets everywhere, where creativity and chaos go hand in hand! Like the joy of gossiping the gospel on the bus or at the club or out with the rambles.

The pervasive, easing, renewing oil – that lubricates and opens up new possibilities. The conversations and the actions that loosen the locks and open the door. The WD40 of our liturgical oils. You could call it the oil of generous faith – faith that just can't help spilling over.

b. Then there's the oil of Chrism – of Christening – of making us more like Christ, this oil symbolising the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is at work in us, changing us, equipping us, empowering us, giving us courage and hope.

Like the anointing of Jesus at his Baptism with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus whose anointing he knew to be like that of the prophet Isaiah: good news for the poor, release for the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed. A royal anointing for real transformation of individual lives and whole communities. An anointing that raises the poor and powerless, that lifts up the lowly.

Let this too be a joy to us, as with our local churches and local communities we pledge ourselves to make Jesus' business our business, - in good news for the poor, in freedom, in genuine clarity of sight and understanding. So meals and food parcels, – as well as action for justice and a fair deal for all – all these are part of our Christening, our Chrism, as we seek to be more like Jesus. On this day we are reminded – this is Christ's business – this is our business.

But all this will all be 'a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal' – it will all be a sham, if we try to do this on our own. This is nothing if it is not an anointing with the love of Christ, so it is Jesus' love which overflows from us. This oil of Chrism is about being made more like Christ, every day, the constant renewal of our lives through his death and resurrection, and through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

You could say this was the oil of courageous hope, following in the footsteps of the one 'who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.' Heb 12.2

c. Then there is the third oil, the oil for the anointing of the sick. Despite the sad context in which it is so often used, it is not inappropriate to see this as in its way joyful, as full of hope and love. Life-giving love.

I am reminded of two critically ill people prayed for in hospital. I'll call them Alan, and John.

Alan, was a rough diamond, an old soldier, not a religious man – but in his dreadful pain he gripped onto the small wooden cross in his hand. As we prayed somehow he knew himself loved. He died not long after, still holding on to the cross.

John, a priest, had been in a coma for weeks – I had prayed the office with him each time I'd been, hoping it somehow reached him. Then one day our bishop joined us, anointed him with oil, and prayed 'out of the depths I cry to you o Lord, Lord, hear my voice'. That was the day he started to get better.

Yes, praying for the sick begs many questions - sometimes indeed the prayer of faith will save the person who is sick – but often, we pray and pray and pray and nothing seems to happen. Did we not pray hard enough? Was it God's will? Was my faith deficient?

However we pray we cannot pretend to have answers. The main thing is to be there and to pray, putting our trust in God. Letting the oil of God's loving wisdom seep in to every situation.

One of the virtues of anointing with the oil for the sick is that is something you simply do. The last thing it needs is too many words. It defies explanation. It is practical. It can be beautiful, and profoundly moving. We don't have all the answers but the God who calls us to pray for the sick, this one God knows and loves.

The oil of anointing, God's gift to us for the healing of people and situations – to me this oil speaks of the priority of this healing ministry of reconciliation and love.

It is expressed in the pastoral care networks formal and informal we set up in our churches and local communities. In the care that goes into visiting, and contacting people who need our prayers. It is evident in the many ways love is put into practice in serving people who are living with poverty, illness, hunger, or anxiety. It is about God's healing grace, for broken bodies, broken spirits, broken relationships. It is the gift of peace.

It is expressed in our willingness to wait and stay waiting awkwardly in prayer. To PUSH – pray until something happens. A way of leaning on God's shoulder. Of drawing close.

Apparently sometimes this oil for the anointing of the sick has historically been used as an ointment – or even as a medicine to drink. I don't recommend this! – but it is an interesting thought.

Whatever it is God offers by way of healing , reconciling, transforming love, surely we want as much of it as possible? Inside, outside, all over!

Yes, let the love of God permeate our whole being, body, mind, and spirit, such that no part of us is untouched by grace. Let this oil of gladness transform us and make us fit for all that lies ahead. You could say this was the oil of life-giving love.

These three oils are about the future. They are about fitting us for what lies ahead, in all kinds of ways.

Just as when the woman at Bethany anointed Jesus' feet with precious oil and wiping them with her hair. She played her part in helping Jesus be ready for the struggles of Holy Week.

'The House was filled with the fragrance of the perfume'

Let this house be so filled today, as we gather around Jesus, the Christ, the anointed one. 'How good and pleasant it is when kindred gather together in unity...'

Whatever has brought us to today, and whatever state God finds us in, the oil of his grace and mercy is here for us to make us useful in his service once again. To make us a blessing, equipping us to bring Good News for the poor, release for the captives, and freedom for the oppressed.

As we come to renew our commitment as ministers of the gospel, lay and ordained, may God anoint us afresh with the Holy Spirit, and give us the strength, wisdom and grace we lack, and which we need if we are to be useful in his service.

Come Holy Spirit. Amen.

Written by the Right Revd Malcolm Macnaughton, Bishop of Repton