



## HOMILY FOR THE MASS OF CHRISM

Saint Barnabas Cathedral, Nottingham : Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> April 2022

My dear brothers in the presbyterate, I'd like to take you back again to the day of your ordination as a priest. The actual ordination ceremony began with this invitation: 'Let those to be ordained priests come forward'. In response we each said, 'Present' or in Latin, 'Adsum'. Did any of us then really know just what we might be getting into, when we committed ourselves that day to following Jesus as a priest? When the ordaining bishop handed us the chalice and paten he said to us, 'understand what you do, imitate what you celebrate, conform your life to the mystery of the Lord's Cross.' I must admit that, looking back on that day I, for one, did not really understand what those words were to mean. I thought I did! But only with the passing years of priestly ministry have I come to grasp something more of what the gesture of prostrating myself on the floor of the Church that day really meant; it's a gesture of profound self-abandonment, of a handing over of one's life to the service of the Lord and his people. Such self-sacrifice comes only from great love; it's impossible without generous love. Such sacrifice I gradually came to see, comes only from a close friendship with Christ crucified, from the one who, in the love he lives out on the Cross, makes possible our own loving response.

Only gradually did I come to understand just what's involved in conforming one's life to the mystery of the Lord's Cross. We know the Cross needs to be central in our lives, because we are disciples of the crucified and risen Christ, but the truth is that we as priests, like most other people, are often afraid of the Cross, of the cost of the Cross in our own lives. In these days of Holy Week, when we listen to the Passion accounts, it's always these words of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane that stop me in my tracks, 'Let this cup pass from me, but not my will but yours be done.' What lay ahead was supremely costly. At that point, after prayer, Jesus embraces the reality of the Cross and the will of his Father. But when the soldiers came for their Master, the apostles fled. It's true that Peter tried to follow, but at a distance. It's impossible to really follow Jesus at a distance, and so Peter ended up denying his Master three times.

The theologian Bonhoeffer, in his book, 'The cost of discipleship', made a distinction between what he called 'cheap grace' and 'costly grace'. Cheap grace is to seek to benefit from what Jesus did on the Cross, without being willing to follow in the way of the crucified one; it is to expect forgiveness without repentance, to accept Jesus, but without changing one's lifestyle, to expect to move straight to the new life of Easter without having to come to terms with the Cross as the place from which Jesus calls each of us to share in his sufferings. The term 'costly grace' might seem at first to be a contradiction, since the very word 'grace' speaks, as we know, of a free gift, one given to all who will receive it, and which can never be bought or earned. Such indeed is the grace of Christ that is offered to all who will receive it. It is grace, because it is given for nothing, but it is costly because, as we know in our own lives, it demands everything of those who receive it. To receive

grace is to relate to Jesus, not at a distance but up close, because it means following him on the way that leads to suffering and the Cross. Jesus is indeed with us when the going is relatively easy in our priesthood, when we find ourselves in a period of green pastures and still waters, but I think, with the passing of years and a deeper awareness of our own fears, frailty and struggles, there comes a new dimension to our relationship with Jesus when, in those more challenging moments of our lives as priests, times when we find we are called to walk through the valley of the shadow of death in some way, it's then especially that we discover that his rod and his staff, the Lord's attentive, protecting companionship, comforts us in a way that other forms of comfort do not. It's then that we find ourselves looking often to the Cross, to the one who can heal and restore the brokenness of our lives; to the one who assures us that we are loved and totally accepted by God. It is there before the Cross that we find our hearts are renewed, and we are once again enabled to love, forgive and accept ourselves for who we each are – the all too human vessels of clay who have been chosen by Christ to serve as his ministers.

Very often, this is first brought home to us, before perhaps we begin to live it ourselves, when we encounter in our ministry parishioners who have been going through sufferings of one kind or another, suffering that could so easily have made their faith falter, but who have discovered, in their darkness and pain, the suffering Jesus, and have felt themselves bound close to him in a way they had never experienced when things were going well. My brothers, I think you would agree that closeness to the crucified and risen Christ can be at its most real and most intimate when we are sharers in suffering, sharers in the Cross. It's then that we begin to learn the truth that it is impossible to truly follow Jesus at a safe distance. We are always being called to follow him up close. Today, as we renew our priestly promises, Jesus, our great High Priest and Suffering Servant, asks us again as his priests if we are willing to drink from his cup. Again we are invited to answer, Adsum, Here I am! Each year, at this Chrism Mass, the invitation is to follow Jesus up close; not to fear the cup, the chalice of suffering in our lives, not to fear the Cross. So let us pray for each other, not just today but each day, that we may strive to live as priests of Jesus Christ, servants of the Suffering Servant, who at Mass each day grasp the chalice of suffering firmly, who know what we are doing, who imitate the sacrifice we offer on our own behalf and on behalf of those we serve, and who are striving, by God's grace, to conform our lives more and more to his Cross.

My dear people, my dear religious and deacons, there isn't a priest present who isn't sustained by your prayers, and by your own lives of faithful witness to the crucified and risen Lord. Thank you for that generous witness and prayer. Please now pray for all the priests within our diocese, and for myself. Pray that the Lord will continue to bless and sustain us in generous service to you, and all in our pastoral care. My brother priests, thank you for your generous, sacrificial, priestly ministry, for the care and respect you show each other, which is supremely important, and for your kindness and support towards me, which helps sustain me in times of difficulty. So, in a moment of silent prayer, let's prepare ourselves to renew the promises of our priesthood, relying utterly on the grace of the love and mercy of God, the inspiring help of the Holy Spirit, brotherly support, and the generous personal witness and prayers of the people of this diocese, those here present and those joining in by means of streaming.

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