

## **Chrism Mass, Ely Cathedral, 2023**

When I was at theological college I was sent with two other students on a short placement to the East End of London, among other things to discover more about the experience of UKME Christians in the life of our churches and in black-led Pentecostal churches. The three of us pitched up one Sunday evening to a particularly charismatic church, eventually swaying like tall trees in a breeze while ecstatic dancing went on around us. The pastor apologised that only 45 minutes had been set aside for our testimonies. I remember speaking about today's gospel reading. I have very little recollection of what I said other than that I padded out my testimony with lots of 'praise the Lord' and 'alleluia' which set the congregation dancing again and gave me a breather. What I do remember was an elderly black woman of the Windrush generation who said that she identified with the unnamed woman as someone who felt repudiated as a black person in white churches where she was looked down on and made to receive Communion only after all the white people so as not somehow to contaminate the chalice. How far we have come, and how far we still have to go to become a fully diverse church in which the full dignity of each person is served.

Those of you who have taken up the Ignatian way of praying imaginatively with the Bible know already what a gift it is to engage with the nameless people who encounter Jesus. At different points in our lives of faith we could be them. I encouraged a terminally ill parishioner to pray in this way and she found herself on a cross and realised that she was in the place of the penitent thief, next to Jesus, and that she was promised paradise by him. She had a beautiful death, her griefs, her fears, her sins washed away. Many of these people whose identity we do not know are people healed of all sorts of diseases, even brought

back to life. We know of Legion, so called because of his multiple demonic personalities, but we do not know his true name restored by the healing and restoration wrought by Jesus. What we do know, as we bless oil for healing, is that so many people had their identity and their bodies restored to them by Jesus. We trust that we have the same identity as them as followers and disciples of Jesus, healed and forgiven over and over again.

The woman with a bad reputation in today's gospel appears to do everything wrong: she gate-crashes someone else's party. She makes Jesus ritually unclean by touching him as a woman outside his own family. She even washes his feet with her tears and dries them with her hair and dares to anoint him with oil. Yet, she actually gets everything right. She does everything that Simon should have done in his offering of hospitality. She does so apparently without premeditation or worrying about being made an even bigger outsider by her outrageous behaviour. One of the things that can draw us to priests and other ministers is our intuition that they know from within themselves real suffering or a tangible turning away from sin or a particular experience of healing and this makes us trust them almost before they utter a word. This is because we know that these people have authority as those who are like Jesus. Fr Hugh Maycock, a former Vicar of Little Mary's in Cambridge, said himself that he slept eighteen hours a day and that when he woke up in his pyjamas it was time for Mass and if he woke in trousers it was time for tea. This was, of course, a pose: even if he appeared effortless, there was extraordinary mission and ministry around a still centre which knew and loved and prayed.

Of course, the encounter that Simon has with Jesus is quite other. What were his motives in inviting Jesus to dinner in the first place? Was it to

engage in theological debate? Whatever the reason, he treats Jesus without the usual courtesies of hospitality like foot washing. He thinks that if he can have Jesus on his turf then he can meet Jesus on his terms. However, he discovers, like Nicodemus, that it is foolish to think that Jesus was ever interested in bargains or transactions. The woman holds nothing back because she feels a love burning inside her that comes from him, in spite of the wrong decisions that have marred her life, healing the suffering she may have endured at the hands of hypocritical men like Simon. Simon also finds out that Jesus rarely turns up on his own. I am sure that many of us have known the Lord to be very close to us just when he presents us with a challenging person or difficult decision. It is certainly true that when we knock on doors and enter a home, Jesus is there ahead of us. When we conduct a funeral visit and find ourselves the hosts in someone else's sitting room as we offer comfort and provide a safe and loving space in which the bereaved can speak about their loved one, we are being exactly who Jesus wants us to be and where he wants us to be. For Jesus, home is always in other people's houses, be that at Bethany with Mary, Martha and Lazarus, or at the house of Zacchaeus – or in the vicarage or Bishop's House.

As we renew our ordination promises today and recollect our first commissioning as a lay minister, Simon is an object lesson for us. The sharp contrast between him and the woman is the meagreness of his love. He is a good man, righteous, and open enough to invite this troublesome rabbi under his roof. He might have been regarded as a rabbi as the equivalent to a reasonable vicar. But somewhere or somehow the well-spring of love had dried up. I told you when I was ill that I had spent forty years preaching grace and yet living works

righteousness. As we bless the oil of baptism, I pray that we may be renewed in the power of the Spirit by the God who both calls and sends. As we bless the oil of Chrism, I pray that we shall receive a fresh anointing as priests and as the priestly people of God. However much we are tempted to talk about 'my ministry' as my entitlement, we are called to remember that we can fly as high as an eagle but only because the Spirit of God is the wind beneath our wings.

I pray most for a renewal of our love. Bishop Edward King wrote in his *Spiritual Letters*: 'Only by breaking your heart into pieces over and over again can you hope to make people begin to think of believing that there is such a thing as love. Don't mind, be miserable, but don't stop loving. You will never regret the misery you go through: and it is not lost, not one bit of it. Not one drop of heart's blood that falls from a love-broken heart ever gets lost'.

St Francis de Sales is hero of mine, partly because he was also tall, fat and bald. He wrote a wonderful book on prayer called *An Introduction to the Devout Life*. His maxim was that the love-broken heart of Christ reveals a kingdom in which nothing is so strong as gentleness; nothing is so gentle as real strength. Dear Anna Matthews wrote in a sermon about priesthood: "For all of us, it is prayer and worship that form us in Christlikeness because when we are looked at by Love, we are changed. We read in the First Letter of John: 'when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is'. The more we learn to see as Christ sees and act as Christ acts: it is with his eyes of compassion that we look on the world; with his hands that we reach out to bless; with his heart that we learn to love."

And we don't give up praying, however dry it can sometimes be. Archbishop Michael Ramsay said that he prayed for five minutes every

morning, but that it took an hour to get there. He said that he only promised to turn up for the Holy Spirit to do the work, straight out of Romans 8. He said that he waited expectantly for God to fill his emptiness with God's fullness. May it be so for us, too.

Jesus told the nameless woman in our gospel that her sins were forgiven and sent her out in peace. I pray this is precisely what will bring us to the cross tomorrow and then to be renewed in God's New Creation in Christ. Amen.