**Sermon by the Bishop of Portsmouth**

**Chrism Eucharist 2021**

Leadership is never far from scrutiny. That is no bad thing. Anyone in a leadership role must make time for reflection on responsibilities, on attributes, and on actions. Any position of leadership needs to be resourced and supported with an honest assessment of what is going well, what could be enhanced, and frankly what needs to be done differently. Christian ministry is no exception to this, and such reflection is part of what we do this morning. But we are not given free range to hurl brickbats at each other. Standing at the side-lines and shouting, or observing from an armchair is an easy pastime. We are here today understanding our need to be accountable, that we require each other, and that above all we rely on the generosity and grace as well as the call of God.

When I preached my first sermon in this diocese – some of you were present, even fewer of you will remember it – I spoke about my first calling, and everyone’s, as a disciple. Disciple, and then bishop, churchwarden, diocesan officer, deacon, Reader, pioneer minister, youth worker, priest. Baptism is the sacrament that commissions Christians for ministry; God forbid then that our view of the church too tightly limits the boundaries of belonging, or that this morning we have less than an inclusive understanding of the ministry of the laos, the whole people of God, of whom those of us in licensed and accredited ministry are only some.

Most of you, like me, recoil, at least to some extent, when referred to as a church leader. We rarely use that term ourselves and we don’t put that on our email footer or our church noticeboards, rightly of course. But it is undeniable that you and I exercise leadership and carry its burden. As you and I meet together for the last time in this way, and it is an extraordinary and imaginative way of being together despite being dispersed, I cannot see most of you but you can see me as I offer you my affection and my gratitude, and I pray for you with both thanksgiving and with confidence for the future.

Leadership in any walk of life has a particular dimension, and as each of us knows in our diverse ministries, there are aspects of the role that are not well known by others. There are details that simply cannot be made more widely known. We hold them in our heart, hopefully with a trusted confessor, and we wrestle with them. We often have to make a decision quickly and always without the benefit of hindsight. It is remarkably easy to stand and declaim that someone should have done something differently when we do not even know a quarter of the facts, nor possess a crystal ball. Holding leadership to account is itself a responsible business.

Corporately we need to ensure that those who have varying degrees of power and influence take care to exercise it in ways that are faithful and honest. The gospel passage we have just heard is perhaps something of an antidote to an easy commentary on leadership. As for the Old Testament lesson. What would modern day methods of recruitment in employment make of that? I trust that the Vacancy in See committee and the Crown Nominations Commission are listening carefully to these bible readings as they discern the call of your next bishop.

*‘The Lord looks on the heart*’ and by that selection method David emerges. God uses some unlikely individuals, remember that. We each of us needs to remember that. God has called us by name because of what God sees within our heart, because of the possibilities, the silent strengths, the inner willingness to go on seeking a closer, deeper more profound relationship with the one who has created and called us. That *‘The Lord looks on the heart*’ is a reminder to us as well about how we look on each other, on those with whom we work and among whom we minister. It is a powerful reminder about our needing to take time in getting to know people and communities. The heart is a place that is not easily glimpsed. On the whole you have to work hard, patiently, sensitively in order to gain the trust that enables people to be honest. Thankfully God has called us because of what God has looked upon and seen in our heart, and not because of the height of our stature or the shape of our profile. Again and again in the scriptures God calls not the obviously gifted and talented, but the youngest, the smallest, the unlikeliest, despite our shortcomings we sometimes say but perhaps it is because of them. ‘He had no form or majesty that we should look at him’, Isaiah reminds us, ‘nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.’ God gives us direction about how to adjust our own vision and the world’s judgements when encountering others.

The gospel passage takes this further. I said it was an antidote to easy commentary on leadership. I say that because Christ’s teaching here is so fundamental to the ministry which I exercise, to the ministry which you exercise. It is crucial to our ministry because it is about how we, being the Church of Jesus Christ, live and order our common life. It is an antidote because it holds before us a not always very comfortable standard by which we are called to live. The model of servant leadership is an easy reference, they are words we often use glibly, but their application is a different matter. Taken together the scriptures we have before us today are more than swallowing our pride and helping out with stacking tables in the church hall. They are in fact about redemption and humility, they define how we should see others and how we must be in service, how we must live and rejoice as children of God. The oil poured on David was not making a mediocre son better, it was not an insurance policy to afford protection. The oil was to take something, someone, profoundly human and mark him out as a child of God with a vocation. The oil we have here is to confirm that which is holy, made in the image of God.

The assurance of Jesus to the disciples that they are at table with him requires us, who are at his table now, to keep our witness under constant review. This is not ‘yet another task’; it is our joy filled duty as those whose hearts have been looked on by God. Frequent reflection on this gospel passage is an essential part of our discipline and it will make us more faithful. We are confronted here by the model we both live out and at the same time offer to the world. It challenges all sorts of assumptions about productivity and outputs, about how and what service is, and what leadership is like. We have an obligation, confirmed at the institution of this sacred meal, to recognise that our gifts are given to us from a beneficent creator so that we might in turn relieve the pain of the oppressed, set free those who are restrained by social patterns, to know the glorious liberty of the children of God.

Luke in both this passage, and to a large degree throughout his gospel, reminds us that what is important is not just what the Christian disciple *does*, but also what she or he *is*. Who we are as children of God, knowing our place at the table, coming face to face with God in Christ, looking salvation in the face. This is the foundation of everything that we do. The essential character of our being as heralds of the gospel, stewards in the household of faith, is the real testimony to the good news. When we accept that this is so, then we are honest with each other, honest to God, and, with a large portion of grace, faithful in our tasks as children who have been looked upon.

I am nervous this morning. I usually am today, and that’s exacerbated by the unique circumstances, by my disappointment at our separation, and because this is my last Chrism Eucharist. I do not today have the consolation of seeing you all and feeling, I dare to have sensed over the years, your affection despite (or is it because of) my failings. You share my ministry of encouragement, teaching and leadership. You expect them from me as bishop, and others expect them of you. I thank you for those times you have offered me, and Sally, your support, your teaching, and your love. I think you know how that feels and what it is like when it is withheld. I have been ‘proud to be Portsmouth’ because of you, with all our lay and ordained colleagues, living, praying, serving our Lord and the Kingdom.

In the awesome recommitments we will soon humbly but courageously make, in the blessing of the oils we shall share and use as extravagantly as God’s gifts are given us, and nourished and strengthened by the spiritual food of Jesus’ crucified and risen, we know that God’s story told over them, everyone and everything, and lived in their strength is everything we need for our callings and for the transforming of this world through Jesus Christ.