

CHRISM EUCHARIST, Maunday Thursday 2014

Portsmouth Cathedral

The Chrism Eucharist is one of those marmite occasions in the life of the church. For some it is the highlight of the year; others would go to considerable lengths to avoid it altogether - and occasionally do. I have to admit that as a parish priest and even as a suffragan bishop, I fell into the latter camp. I simply could not understand why we had to take time out of one of the busiest weeks of the year, to re-state the blindingly obvious in our vows and share in a Eucharist with similarly tired and harassed colleagues. It's only now, as a diocesan bishop, when I stand here feeling so genuinely glad to see you all gathered, and feeling - at the risk of sounding overly sentimental or paternalistic - so proud of you, and proud that we belong together - that I find myself looking forward to this service like no other. And every year I approach the task of preaching on this occasion with the sort of nervousness I've rarely felt since I was a young curate.

This year, however, I got a grip. I took myself in hand, and asked myself what this anxiety says about me, and about us in this context. On one level, it speaks to the huge and real tensions that exist just below the surface in the Church of England, and that are reflected in some small measure among us. Gay marriage is the obvious hot topic of the day, but there are others too. I'm very conscious that last Saturday I attended the alternative Chrism Mass held for those who cannot in good conscience accept women's ordained ministry. The need for separate services reflects our continuing inability to live fully as one body, and that saddens me, despite the welcome presence of some of us at both services. Then there are the smaller theological and stylistic tensions that are reflected in our worship. I found myself this year thinking long and hard about the detail of how we should renew our vows - whether we should express our unity by making one shared vow; whether we should, as we will today, make separate vows as lay ministers, deacons, priests and bishops. And I know that the cathedral will have wrestled with finding a balance of music to reflect the breadth of our traditions. Living together, praying together, breaking bread together, reaching out to the world together, remains as challenging now as it was when those first disciples gathered to eat with Jesus that fateful night.

So, although most bishops will brazen it out (and I will too to some degree), among friends, among the people I love, I will admit that a nervousness creeps in, as I try to find the right words, the right gestures, to breathe peace and unity into the hearts of people and a church burdened with tensions.

But there's something more, too, something both of today's readings highlight in their different ways. It's to do with love, to do with commitment. In our OT reading, we revisit the story of Samuel's calling. We encounter Samuel in his youth, before he knows much if anything of God, well before he has begun to understand the pivotal leadership role he will play. At first he thinks Eli is calling, and out of devotion he gladly gets up and goes to his master. But when he understands from Eli that it is God who calls, his response is open hearted and full: "Speak for your servant is listening." These are words that take me back to the early days of my own calling, with a kind of yearning for the innocence and open heartedness that is so much more difficult once we have been hurt, or once we become weary and cynical from the rigours of ministry and church life. And the gospel reading has a similar effect. Here is a woman who pours out all her wealth out of love for her Lord, not caring whether her reputation will suffer or her friends and colleagues will approve. I wonder how many of us have retained that capacity genuinely to be true to our deepest desire, to

unselfconsciously pour out our love for Jesus so publicly and so freely. I dare to hope that together you and I can embrace that again today.

Standing here to preach, nervous in your presence, I realise that part of my nervousness comes from the often daunting task of openly expressing my love for Jesus, my love for you and for the people we serve; and doing so with freshness and confidence, despite the inevitable toll borne by me and us all in the frustrations and weariness and tensions of church life.

This is the challenge we face together in this service. I know and understand the weariness, even sometimes the cynicism, that can creep in, because ministry is demanding. Thank you – all of you - and those many more who minister with you in our parishes, chaplaincies and communities. Today as we make our vows, we come before God and say, with Samuel, “speak, your servant is listening”. And as we renew our promise to serve, in our hearts we break open the perfume, and summon once again from within ourselves the extravagant depths of love that we continue to lavish upon Jesus and upon the world. So thank you for indulging me – for responding to my call upon you today, to gather amidst a busy week to break bread and be together. And thank you above all for rising to the challenges of the ministry we share, and continuing to love and serve with such depth and commitment.

+CHRISTOPHER