

Chrism Eucharist (Maundy Thursday) 2015, Portsmouth Cathedral

Like many and perhaps most of you, my day begins with Morning Prayer, in my case in the chapel at Bishopsgrrove with my chaplain, Jenny. As we have journeyed through Lent this year we have found ourselves ploughing through some grim Old Testament readings – stories of vengeance and destruction, of anger and injustice. Then we have put down the bible (often after just a little bit of a sigh or groaning about the misery that the lectionary inflicts on us in Lent) to be confronted by the refrain or antiphon of the Canticle, derived from our first reading, which runs, “full of compassion and mercy and love is God the most high the almighty.” The contrast could not be more stark. One moment we are hearing about quite appalling acts of infidelity, cruelty and harshness on the part of the people and apparently on the part of God. The next moment we are confidently declaring to one another that God is loving and merciful and compassionate.

Having begun the day in this way, with the shock of moving from horror to compassion before I’m often really fully awake, I’ve realised that these contrasts are actually built into our daily lives as clergy and lay ministers. There’s a very real sense in which our task, as individual Christians and collectively as a church, is to answer the anger and hurt and hostility of the world with compassion and mercy and love. And that’s no mean feat, as all of us know to our cost. I’ve yet to meet a parish priest who has not, at some time or another, felt mauled by their PCC, and then had to walk into church the next day and act with grace and compassion towards those very same people. I have yet to meet a lay minister who has not at some stage felt wounded by colleagues within the church, and who has continued to share their love and their gifts through the pain of it all. And I know all too well that my senior team, and those who serve on the diocesan staff, at my colleagues at Bishopsgrrove who are here today, exercise that very same ministry in relation to me. The grimace on my face and Jenny’s, when we read those readings and then hear of God’s compassion owes more than a little to our self-awareness. Christian discipleship, Christian ministry, is tough, and the first disciples competing for rank and status in today’s gospel reading are not alone in their capacity for folly and error. We are all implicated in the hurt; we are all required to answer the hurt with compassion.

So today we gather, at the start of what will be a gruelling few days for most of us. We gather at the foot of the cross, seeing in this image of suffering both the hurt we inflict and the hurt we endure. At the cross, both extremes are present in over-abundance. In the days to come we will see played out all the worst that we humans are capable of inflicting on one another: jealousy and anger, cowardice and incomprehension, betrayal and greed, vindictiveness, cruelty and violence. And we will see too love in its divine fullness – not just in the figure of Jesus, but also in the love shown by Mary, the disciples who risked life and limb to stay near, the women who gathered to anoint the body. The oil for anointing which we bless and take today is one of the tools of our ministry. It is a balm for the body and also a powerful sign of that generous, compassionate love of Christ crucified which is at the heart of all we seek to be and do.

That love, I know, is shown day in, day out, sometimes barely visible to many, in our parishes and chaplaincies. From the letters and emails that arrive on my desk, I catch a small

glimpse of the hurts, frustrations and challenges of ministry, and I know that there are in addition countless stories that I know nothing of. And I know that in each and every instance, you are praying and loving way beyond the call of duty. And I know the cost.

So as we gather to recommit ourselves to Christ's service today, I want to thank you for all that we share in the ministry to which we are called. Thank you for your commitment to sharing God's compassion and mercy and love throughout the challenges you face. Thank you for bearing with me and with my senior colleagues when we inadvertently add to your burden. And in the days to come, I wish you strength in your journey to the cross, and, when it comes, a holy and blessed Easter.

Bishop Christopher