

The Priesthood of the Baptised

The Chrism Mass which is celebrated on the Tuesday of Holy Week¹ is basically a celebration of priesthood. It is the gathering of the priests with their bishop, in the presence of the people of the diocese, as a sign and affirmation of their unity of ministry in service of the people. The Oil of Catechumens and the Oil of the Sick are blessed, and the Oil of Chrism consecrated, by the bishop – oils that are used in various aspects of priestly ministry – and these are then taken back to the parishes as a link with that united diocesan celebration at which the bishop presides.

I dare say that the focus, prior to the Second Vatican Council, may well have been solely on the celebration of ordained priesthood. It was the Council that had the following to say about a concept which may have been new to most of us, that of the baptised priesthood of the people:

The baptised, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated to be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, that through (Christian works) they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the perfection of him who has called them out of darkness into his marvellous light. ... They should everywhere on earth bear witness to Christ and give an answer to everyone who asks a reason for the hope of eternal life which is theirs.

Taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, the source and summit of the Christian life, they offer the divine victim to God and themselves with it. And so it is that, both in the offering and in Holy Communion, each in his own way has his own part to play in the liturgical action.

When we were anointed with the Oil of Chrism at baptism, the priest prayed:

God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin, given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and welcomed you into his holy people. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation. As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as a member of his body, sharing everlasting life.

Just before that prayer I usually explain that chrism is a special oil used at baptisms, confirmations and the ordination of priests, and that it is also used by the Church of England at the coronation of kings and queens. It is this anointing which confers a share in Christ's ministry of priest, prophet and king – a ministry into which we are baptised and for which we are duly anointed or "chrismed" (Christ-ened, the name Christ meaning "anointed").

In one of the Easter Week texts in the Office of Readings², the writer says:

Now that you have been baptized into Christ and have put on Christ, you have become conformed to the Son of God. For God destined us to be his children,

¹ Here in our diocese it is celebrated on the Tuesday because of the problem in a diocese the size of ours of priests having to travel from places as far away from Middlesbrough as Hull having to then get back to their parishes in time for the evening "Mass of the Lord's Supper".

² The reading is taken from "instructions to the newly baptized at Jerusalem" but the writer is unknown.

so he has made us like to the glorious body of Christ. Hence, since you share in Christ, it is right to call you ‘Christs’ or anointed ones... You have become ‘Christs’ by receiving the sign of the Holy Spirit.

We are members of the body of Christ, we are priest, prophet and king because he is priest, prophet and king. We therefore share in the priesthood of all of the baptised, just as we also share the call to prophecy (bearing witness to God) and to a share in his kingdom and to rule with him in that kingdom.

At this year’s Chrism Mass, Bishop Draine y gave particular emphasis to the priesthood of the baptised in also, therefore, emphasising lay ministry and service. Indeed, following the priests’ renewal of their commitment to their bishop, he says to the people:

Dear sisters and brothers, as God’s holy people, you have heard the priests of the diocese renew their promises. Each of us has a share in Our Lord’s priesthood, given to us at our baptism and confirmation. So, in the name of the Church, I ask you if you are resolved to exercise that priesthood in the service of the Church?

Everyone present declared that they were and, presumably, if it had been physically possible to assemble the entire diocese for that celebration, everyone would have answered “We are”. And yet, *are* we?

How do you picture priesthood? What do you expect of a priest? I suspect that most people’s answers would have to do with ministry and service and, no doubt, the ministry part would have to do with those things that only a priest can do by virtue of his ordination. But if we accept that we share in the priesthood, in our case the priesthood of all the baptised, what areas of ministry and service are therefore open to us? And if they are open to us, are we carrying them out?

The Church is everyone – *we* are church. The life of the Church depends on us and our involvement. It will be what we make of it and much of that will depend on the degree to which we accept our priesthood – our ministries and aspects of service. Again the bishops’ question: *are you resolved to exercise that priesthood in the service of the Church?* What needs to be done? What could I be doing that I am not doing at the moment? What areas of service and ministry are crying out for my involvement? It’s the old thing about “use it or lose it” – if I don’t do it and no one else does either, then things will gradually grind to a halt because, quite simply, things are not getting done.

And I’m not talking about the things that more immediately come to mind, practical things like the sacristy, and church cleaning and so on, as important as they are. I’m talking about the things that really challenge us in our recognition and acceptance of what the priesthood of the baptised is all about: ministry of the word, ministry of holy communion, pastoral ministry to the sick and housebound, music ministry, catechetical ministry, and so on. It’s very easy to say we don’t feel worthy to do some of those things, but then who is worthy? None of us is - in and of ourselves. We are worthy because God has anointed us at baptism and has called us to share in

the life of his Son who is Priest, Prophet and King. You can't get anymore worthy than that.

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