

Sermon by Bishop Martin

**Chrism Eucharist with the Reaffirmation of Ordination Commitment and
the Blessing of the Oils**

Tuesday 12 April 2022 at All Saints Hove

“They shall repair the ruined cities”

As Jesus unfolds the scriptures that speak about his identity and mission, today’s reading from Isaiah gives us some sense of the effect of his saving work.

The spiritual and moral processes of liberation that are good news for the poor, the captive, the blind and the oppressed also give shape to the built environment where freedom and justice flourish. The repair of the earthly city, in ways that will align it with the heavenly city of Jerusalem, is an emblem of the year of the Lord’s favour, the year of Jubilee.

Rubbish housing, poor quality schools, overcrowded roads that pollute community space, empty mansions and apartments owned by absentee landlords, and a host of other vanity projects – these are the evil signs of institutional greed and its power to corrode the moral fabric of our relationships as it also contaminates the earth and dismantles its rhythms.

And then there is Ukraine, where the impact of destructive greed and evil is seen even more clearly and shockingly.

The images from that warzone should be like icons in our liturgy this year, illuminating the potency in our celebration of the paschal mystery of Easter,

asserting the truth by which we know we shall all be judged, and defining the power of love by which we are saved and brought to resurrection glory.

This potent work of truth and love is, quite literally, in your hands, and I have been reminded of that by seeing photographs of Ukrainian clergy celebrating the sacred mysteries of redemption in the arenas of destruction where they minister.

One beautiful example of this was a photograph of two Ukrainian army chaplains conducting the marriage of a young couple serving in the army. They were all in uniform, surrounded by fellow troops in balaclavas, holding rifles. The bride held some flowers and had a tiny white veil, she and the groom held the traditional lighted candles and were kneeling on a white cloth that constituted sacred space for the solemnisation of their marriage.

And the insignia of the priests was intriguing. Over their combat uniforms they wore the orthodox style stole and the two ornamented cuffs (*epimanikia*) which are a sign of ordained ministry in that tradition.

These cuffs gave an extraordinary emphasis to the hands of the two priests and what they were making possible.

Surrounded by the debris and impact of hostility, priests and laity together were enacting a profound commitment to unity in its most intimate form of mutual self-giving, and to their part in shaping a new society, a protest of love arising from the ashes of war. They were starting to repair the ruined cities. This is God's work in our hands, for made in God's image we are its architects and builders, its priests and prophets.

In the Christian tradition of iconography, the saving work of God our creator is often depicted as a hand, extending out of the cloud, blessing and directing the story of creation and its restoration, as Jesus Christ, the Son of the unseen Father, takes flesh in Mary's womb, is born, baptised in the Jordan, transfigured

on the mountain, and lifted up from the earth on the cross in the hour of his glorification when all this work is brought to consummation and our destiny as citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem is secured.

And the instigation of this work in time, in the intimate circumstances of our lives, is the work of your hands as deacons and priests, presenting to those we serve the life-giving mysteries of word and sacrament

In many parts of the Church of England we have recovered the tradition of anointing the hands with the oil of Chrism in the rite of ordination to the priesthood.

This is a small detail of enormous significance and something to which the *epimanikia* point us. It means that wherever you are functioning ministerially, whether in the liturgy in church or in a multitude of other contexts that flow from it, your anointed hands are an extension of the work of God, rebuilding, restoring, repairing what is damaged and disfigured, in order that the glory of God might begin to be seen.

The newly-weds, kneeling in the dust of a Ukrainian outpost, are an extreme and beautiful example of that. But so is the person you anoint with the oil of the sick in an overheated flat, smelling of neglect but radiant with faith and the practice of prayer. So too is the gorgeous baby you baptise and mark with the oil of catechumens, knowing that after the agony of multiple miscarriages this child is the miracle of life that its parents had begun to doubt. So too is the 56 year old that episcopal hands confirmed, sealing the gifts of the Holy Spirit with the oil of Chrism in the cross marked between tattoos on the forehead. Those tattoos once belonged to a former life of violent crime, but now they are hollowed as an evangelistic passport into a culture where Jesus Christ, hitherto hidden and unknown, can confidently be spoken of as “one like us”.

In these and so many other circumstances, your anointed hands exercise the ministry of the hand of God incarnate in the life of Jesus Christ. And though the *epimanikia*, the cuffs of gold, will not be visible, the intervention of the glory of heaven is nonetheless ministered through you.

You will know, from your own experience, that there is a lot you can read in the hands that are extended to receive holy communion. And in a similar way, the demands and sorrows of the recent past will be written in your hands, my dear brothers and sisters, as you come to offer them again to God. There will be signs in these hands of the strain of being both distanced and connected by Zoom in pastoral encounters and a pervasive sense of loss, of the tedium of administration, and the sheer effort of carrying everyone else's barbs and irritation, as well as their hopes and enthusiasms.

It can sometimes be difficult to summon up the imagination and energy to repair the ruined cities, which in terms of our parishes and Church institutions will be about nurturing and re-nurturing our congregations as missionary disciples; recovering our own and encouraging their rhythms of silence, retreat, study, reflection; starting up the choir again; getting back into the school; finding a new treasurer. The list is endless. And I hope that as bishops we don't add to it thoughtlessly and unnecessarily.

Thank you for the cost and commitment it has taken to get through to this point, and thank you for the sign of hope and encouragement that you have been, and continue to be, whenever possible, to the people that you serve in the name of Jesus Christ, the Chief Shepherd and guardian of our souls. He knows you and loves you, and he says this to you: "Give me your hand, put it into my side."

For Thomas, that encounter with the risen Lord was a moment of re-
invigoration in his vocation and faith, as he responds, "My Lord and my God."
For us, the wounded side of Jesus is the source of sacramental life – water and

blood, baptism and the Eucharist. Immerse yourselves, at his invitation, in the grace of these gifts, given and renewed at the font and the altar, and let that grace renew and sustain you in the year that lies ahead.

And as you offer to him afresh your hands and your very self, remember with joy and confidence these words of ordination encouragement:

Know what you are doing and imitate the mystery you celebrate; model your life on the cross of our glorious Saviour, Jesus Christ.