***Chrism Mass Homily***

***The Bishop of Chichester***

***Chichester Cathedral***

***Wednesday in Holy Week, April 16 2025***

Text

*They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.* Isaiah 61.3

I want to talk to you about vestments and to make no apology for being predictable! Permission to do this is there in the first reading from Isaiah, which tells us that the sign of the Lord’s favour is the gift of a garland to wear, the oil of gladness, and a beautiful mantle.

We read the Bible with myopic vision if we don’t see what is being worn by those who inhabit its pages. That’s why artists are so interesting as Biblical commentators: they ask about the origin and significance of its visual reality. For example, what was Isaiah seeing in the vision that opens the 6th chapter of his collected writings, with the Lord enthroned, wearing a robe and seraphs in attendance? And where else had he seen something like this, that gave shape to his imagination and content to his description?

The reference to the house filled with smoke, and live coals before the altar, suggests that we are in the Temple, where Psalm 22 says that God ‘inhabits the praises of Israel’. That’s an ambiguous phrase, suggesting God wears them like a robe, as Psalm 104 puts it: ‘thou art clothed with majesty and honour, thou deckest thyself with light as it were with a garment’.

And in the vision of Zechariah, the filthy clothes are removed from the High Priest Joshua, who is then clothed with festal apparel, and a clean turban, or mitre, is placed on his head (Zachariah 3.1-5). This is a sign of the renewal of priestly ministry that is a ritual affirmation of the people’s faith in God, symbolised by their worship. In Scriptural terms, the vesture of the sacred ministers of God is not at all insignificant.

So in this renewal of the sacred ministry that touches on nothing less than the glorious, costly work of our salvation by Jesus Christ, who is our great High Priest, what is the meaning of this apparel I’m wearing today? A former colleague once said, “Well, you look much better from the back.” I think she meant that she liked the vivid green of some kind of tree. But what does that tree betoken? Where does it come from?

This odd phrase ‘oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord’ opens up the theme of today’s celebration in which oil from the olive tree is blessed and consecrated, and we renew the solemn commitment of our ordination.

‘The planting of the Lord to display his glory’ touches a nerve for God’s chosen people with their nomadic history, who see putting down roots and harvesting the fruits as a sign of being blessed with a stable home. This phrase, in its Latin version, *plantatio Domini*, is echoed in Matthew’s gospel when Jesus says, ‘Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted’ (Matt 15.13), a gloss on his quotation from Isaiah 29.13 ‘This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me’.

So here’s how the meaning takes shape. Praise, worship, and the sacrifice of a broken and a contrite heart, form us into the material in which God works. The visual emblem of the tree is a very public statement about our calling to be the soil in which the seed of the gospel is planted, takes root, grows, and bears fruit.

The Greek version of this phrase takes us even further into the gospel of Matthew and into the Passion narrative. The day after his Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem, Jesus has a hostile discussion with the chief priests and elders about his authority. This prompts him to tell two parables: first about the sons, one who said Yes, but did nothing and the other who said No, but then actually delivered, and a second parable that uses *φυτεύω*, the same Greek verb for ‘planting’ as Isaiah uses, for planting a vineyard, from which, with no authority, the tenants unjustly withhold the fruit of the vine and kill the owner’s son.

The emblem of the tree and its fruit reverberates with global significance today, posing the question: ‘by what authority?’ By what authority do we deforest the Amazon, pollute rivers with chemicals and fill the seas with our plastic waste? By what authority to we trade with unjust scales that damage the livelihood of millions of people who become a statistic in the calculation of collateral damage? By what authority do we allow human beings who are still children to be deployed in guerilla warfare, or traded as a commodity for the leisure industry – a euphemism for the crime of sexual abuse?

The abandonment of our sense of obedience to God and our accountability to him and to each other has not given us the benefit of greater freedom. As Pope Francis observes in *Laudato si*, his encyclical letter on Our Common Home, the Earth, ‘Our freedom fades when it is handed over to the blind forces of the unconscious, of immediate needs, of self-interest and of our ever-increasing power. In this sense we stand naked and exposed in the face of our ever-increasing power, lacking the wherewithal to control it’ (LS 105)

The tree that adorns this ministerial vestment is an emblem of our ministry as stewards of the mysteries of God, and it is a sign by which we shall be judged, an authoritative sign of the truth of God’s revelation and of our stewardship of the knowledge of good and evil. It is the tree on which we hung the Father’s beloved Son and left him to die. And yet, by the compassion and the hidden wisdom of God, this very same tree is the source of our healing and our hope, our peace and our freedom.

And all of this is intensely personal for us individually who are called to ordained ministry. When called, I wanted nothing more than to say Yes to God’s call and to do his work, and yet too often there are times when it feels that I simply cannot or choose not to meet the demands of that calling. And there are times when I see the unmistakable signs of divine compassion, joy and freedom in the lives of those outside the Church who have said No to God but seem to have an infused capacity for the godly virtues I struggle to sustain.

Here is where the curious purple emblem on this vestment, which you see when I face you, becomes important. It’s drawn from the Piper tapestry and it represents the wounded hands, feet and sacred heart of our crucified Master. In this mysterious sign, which is the essence of our ministry, all our fragility, fears and failures are absorbed into his wounds by the power of love that triumphs over death. These wounds become the glorious scars which are the marks of salvation. What we have to do is dare to allow the wounds of our insufficiency to be made, by the work of the Holy Spirit, a sacrifice sufficient and acceptable to God the Father.

May we have the courage to let our hearts be wounded by the knowledge of God’s power made perfect in human weakness. And, dear brothers and sisters, it is my greatest joy and privilege to pray for you and to give thanks to God for you each day because, in so many different ways and contexts, you dare to respond to this call again and again, knowing its cost, and accepting the frailty that each of us knows within ourselves. It is our frailty that God loves and uses, not our claims to have done his work. Indeed, we have nothing more generous to give than ourselves, in the humble and penitent knowledge of that reality.

I want to conclude this homily where Rowan Williams concludes his book, *The Wound of Knowledge*. He rather improbably links Martin Luther and St John of the Cross, as Christians for whom the test of honesty is whether you could ‘look into the darkness in which Christianity has its roots, the darkness of God being killed by his creatures, of God himself breaking and reshaping all religious language by manifesting his activity in vulnerability, failure and contradiction’. So we are drawn, through the wound of this knowledge, to embrace the mystery of the tree of salvation, the cross, as boldly we confess, like St Paul, in spite of all our human and ministerial unworthiness, ‘I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified…that your faith might not rest in human wisdom but in the power of God’ (1Cor 2:2,5).