



Homily read at the Chrism Mass on 6 April 2023 in St Mary's Cathedral,
Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle

My dear brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ

The blessing of the Holy Oils is one of the most ancient and beautiful liturgical ceremonies. The Sacred Chrism is used in Baptism, the sacrament of confirmation, the ordination of priests and bishops, the dedication of churches and the consecration of altars. The manifold symbolism of oil explains the fact of its choice; it is fuel for the flame, a healing balm for the sick, a strengthening ointment for the athlete and so naturally suggests illumination, assuaging of pain, and power.

The close connection with the preparation of the oils for the Easter Liturgy, the baptising and confirming of new followers of Christ, and the ministers of these sacraments, enabled the Fathers of Vatican II to see an opportunity in this Chrism Mass for celebrating the priesthood of the Church.

The image of Christ the High Priest which is foremost in my mind is that suggested to me by the Church Father, Origen. He recalls the story of the Sacrifice of Isaac. The events are familiar enough to all of us: Isaac, the son of Abraham is commanded by his father to build an altar of sacrifice, and he himself carries the wood to make the sacrificial fire. Unbeknown to him it is he who is to be sacrificed. However, at the last minute he is spared, and a ram is offered in his stead. Origen draws out for us the meaning of the role of Isaac in this familiar and important story. Isaac is not just the Victim, but as the person who also builds the fire, he takes on the role of the priest. Christ is for us both priest and Victim. Not just the one who dies for us but also the one who carries the wood of the cross on which he was to die.

All priesthood in the church is derived from this sacrifice of Christ. The one, and once and for all, redeeming sacrifice. A sacrifice that opened for us the way to the Father. The ministerial priest, the ordained presbyter, is the person ordained by the church to enable God's people to share directly in the benefits of the sacrifice. Through the breaking of bread and the outpouring of the cup the benefits of Jesus's sacrifice are made to those who wish to avail themselves of this display of God's love for his people. We are brought into the presence of God and given not just the promise of eternal life but the food for the journey as well. The importance of this cultic role of the priest must never be played down, whether it is accepted or understood by our society or not. In this time, it is easy for a priest to forget or to put aside this aspect of priesthood because it is not always seen as relevant to present needs. The danger is that we find ourselves isolated and holding a minority view. The temptation is then to see our worth entirely in terms of usefulness and function.

My brother priests, always remember that your sacred calling and the awesome mysteries that you are privileged to celebrate set you apart from other people and place on you a special responsibility to be Christ to those you serve. There is no getting away from this truth.

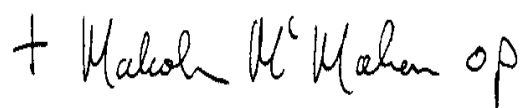
In the renewal of priestly promises which follows this homily you will be asked to be resolved to be more united with the Lord Jesus. Undoubtedly there is much joy in serving the Lord and his people by being faithful stewards of the mysteries of God, but there is pain too. As priests of the diocese of Hexham and Newcastle you will have experienced some of the pain that goes with being a priest. Pain comes in many forms and is intrinsically related to priesthood, because if we are conformed to Jesus then we too must bear the marks of his passion and death on the cross as well as carry the light of his resurrection. The pain of the events of recent months has impinged heavily on you and the people you serve. We bear the responsibility and the consequences of the actions of others, and this is painful. But if we are truly to be conformed to Jesus, this should not surprise us. He is both priest and victim, and if we are to share in his one priesthood then bearing this kind of hurt and pain is part of the gift of priesthood which you received at your ordination. This can only make you a better priest; you will be more understanding, more caring and more tender in your ministry.

When you break the consecrated bread in the sacred liturgy remember that it is your duty always to break unblest bread and share it with the hungry. The flip side of the disc, the

other side of the coin, is to reach out to those who do not know Christ and announce to them the good news of our salvation, to feed the hungry and heal the sick, to welcome the stranger. My brothers, I say these few things to you today to encourage you in your ministry. Never forget what you are. Doubt and uncertainty about the role and function of a priest do not change in the slightest what you are. Accept again the gift of priesthood and then you will make the love of Christ visible to others.

And now I speak to all the baptised. Baptism enables all those who live in Christ to share in his priesthood. As the new people of God, it has fallen on us all to be priests to the world. Through you the world will be sanctified. The presence of baptised Christians in everyday situations brings Christ to the world. By virtue of our Baptism, the Holy Spirit is present in each of us. That places a responsibility on us to live up to that great gift. Our response is what matters and others will judge Christ and his church by the way we behave. More positively we can stand out from the crowd and make a difference to society. We uphold the dignity of the individual, in the womb, in the workplace or the refugee camp and on the deathbed. Christ is present to us in all these situations, suffering with us as the Victim but redeeming us by his priesthood. As lay people your part in the scheme of things is to bring Christ to world, where you are, into your world of friends, of work, of school and family. It is a daunting task.

Finally, I want to thank every one of you today for the part you play in the life of the church in Hexham and Newcastle. As priests, deacons, religious and people we make up the church in this diocese. We need each other. We need to support each other and show that we are united in our mission to be like Christ.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Malcolm McMahon OP". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Most Reverend Malcolm McMahon OP

Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle and
Archbishop of Liverpool