

Homily for the Chrism Mass

16th April 2014

Archbishop George Stack

Every year, the Archbishop of Canterbury recommends a book for Lent. In 2013 he chose a book called “Abiding” by Ben Quosh. It explored the meaning of the words of Jesus: “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me” (John 15:4)

“Abide” is not a very common or even popular word in our language today. It is probably most often used when we say “I can’t abide him or her” or “this or that situation”. But Ben Quosh explores Jesus “abiding” with us in the three phases of his life. He explores how Jesus invites us to “abide” with him, summed up ultimately in the Holy Communion we celebrate at Mass.

He writes “Jesus’s three years of active ministry, in which he calls and trains his disciples to continue his work after he has gone, can be understood as God in Christ working with his people - bringing them along with him as he teaches and inspires them to share his mission”.

“From his arrest in Gethesemane until his death on the cross can be seen as God in Christ working for his people, doing a work for us that we cannot accomplish on our own behalf”. We call it atonement for our sins.

“But God in Christ is active not just in the three years of ministry, nor in the week of lonely suffering, but in the thirty years before the life of Nazareth, the hidden life, the ordinary life, without which Jesus working with and working for could not have happened. It is being with his people”.

All of that reaches its climax in Jesus reading from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18) and he adds “This text is being fulfilled even as you listen”. Being fulfilled. If you were to substitute “Jesus” for, the “being fulfilled”, and read that he is the message itself, he is the good news, he is the freedom, he is the sight for the blind. That is what Ben Quosh was saying when he wrote that Jesus was working for his people, working alongside and abiding with his people.

I have been asked to take part in a TV program on social problems, unemployment and educational opportunities in Wales. I am sure there will be strident voices saying that these problems can be overcome if only people were better motivated not least to find jobs and all that involves. But I think of the work of the school breakfast clubs, the Food Banks and our own St. Vincent de Paul outreach as signs that it isn't quite as simple as that. Pope Francis is teaching powerfully that we have to address the structures of injustice as well as the victims of injustice in order to deal with the social, moral and spiritual poverty we see all around us.

In that program, I want to be able to say that the Catholic people of the Diocese of Cardiff are active in being Good News to the poor. It was Mother Theresa who said in the West you have a different kind of poverty, a deeper poverty, a poverty of isolation a poverty of loneliness, a poverty of spirit which causes dis-ease, at the heart of society.

I want to be able to say our parishes are places of outreach and welcome, engaging with the joys and hopes, the fears and sadness of their local communities. At the Offertory we shall have a collection for our work for the poor.

I hope I can mix my metaphors when I say that this collection, together with Lenten Alms, is the "other side of the coin" of the blessing of oils, which will take place at his Mass. The oils are symbols of a caring Church, a worshipping Church, an evangelizing Church. It is a church of healing, a Church which seeks to make people whole. Everything we do, and say, and are as a Church are bound together in the Body of Christ. Pope Francis has spoken about a Church of the poor, for the poor. In his Lenten letter he asks how can we enrich others by our own poverty? He concludes "I distrust charity that costs nothing and does not hurt".

The priest is the minister of this healing. That is why we renew our vows on the day of blessing the oils. Pope Francis again. " In the image of the Good Shepherd the priest is a man of mercy and compassion, close to his people and servant of all.... He can embrace others in mercy and forgiveness because he allows himself to be embraced by God...If the priest has experienced forgiveness himself, he will know how to offer it to others". As we renew our priestly promises we ask you, the Priestly People of God, to pray with us and for us as we seek to worship Him in Spirit and in Truth.