

HOMILY FOR THE MASS OF CHRISM

1st APRIL 2015

ST. DAVID'S CATHEDRAL CARDIFF

ARCHBISHOP GEORGE STACK

“And all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he rolled up the scroll and began to speak to them”.

Who could fail but be moved in recent weeks by the beheading in Libya of twenty one Christians by Islamic state? They were executed because of their Christian faith, having left Egypt to escape poverty and search for work. Their final words before dying were *“Jesus help me”*. In commending them to God, Pope Francis has called them true Christian martyrs.

The pictures of these and other executions which have been shown on our television screens have an almost mesmeric effect. We find it difficult to take our eyes off them, hardly believing the brutality they convey. *“All our eyes are fixed on them...”* which of course is part of the purpose of the propaganda exercise.

The eyes of all the soldiers who were responsible for the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero were fixed on him on 24th March 1980. A nervous and shy man, Romero gradually gained courage to condemn the rulers of El Salvador for their oppression of the poor. He preached sermons against them on radio and television. He knew he would be murdered, but wasn't afraid. He said: *“You can tell the people that if they succeed in killing me, that I forgive and bless those who do it. Hopefully they will realise they are wasting their time. A bishop will die, but the Church of God, which is His people, will never*

die". As he celebrated Mass in a hospital chapel that day, a gunman from the gallery of the church shot him through the head. Romero will be declared 'Blessed' on the 24th May this year at a ceremony in El Salvador.

All eyes of the congregation are fixed on that sacred moment when the priest elevates the body and blood of Christ at the consecration. It is at that moment the priest comes to the heart of the priesthood: This is my Body. This is my Blood. All eyes in the church are fixed on the priest when he preaches at Mass too, because he preaches not in his own right, not because of his own worthiness but because he has ordained, directed, authorised to do so *'in persona Christi'*. Knowing that we priests "*carry this treasure in earthen vessels*" (2 Cor 4:7) is one reason why the congregation is asked to 'pray for your priests' as we renew our priestly vows at this Chrism Mass.

In a few moments, we bless symbols of Christ's love for his people in the oil we use for the sacraments. 'All eyes are fixed on the him' when the priest goes to hospital for the anointing of the sick, or the deathbed for the giving of the Last Rites. How lovely it was to hear the words of the family of a terminally ill person recently when they said to the priest 'Thank God you've come'. 'All eyes are fixed on the priest' if they can be taken off the child when the oil of Baptism is poured and the child is given a share in the risen life of Christ himself. What pride parents show during the Confirmation of their young people anointed with the oil of Chrism. 'Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit' guaranteeing the undying love of God for the one who is confirmed. And what great hopes for the future of the Diocese at the ordination of a new priest, anointed with the same oil, the oil of Christ who is the Anointed One.

There is no doubt that this Diocese of Cardiff, like so many others, has gone through a dry time with a reduced number of priests in recent years. Since 2011 there have been six deaths, five retirements and three departures of priests from the Diocese. And one ordination last year – the first for seven years. This inevitably demands changes in patterns of ministry in both parishes and in the Diocese at large. There are signs of hope for the future, with five

men in the seminary preparing for the priesthood, hopefully soon to be joined by another this year.

At the conclusion of the ceremony of Renewal of Priestly Vows the Bishop is instructed to ask you to '*...pray for your priests that the Lord may pour out his gifts abundantly upon them.....so that they may lead you to Him who is the source of salvation*'. As we join together in those prayers '*...all our eyes will be fixed on them*' as we give thanks for them and for the service our priests give to God and to His people in this Church of Cardiff.