

CHRISM MASS HOMILY

ST. DAVID'S CATHEDRAL

WEDNESDAY 24TH MARCH 2016

ARCHBISHOP GEORGE STACK

Even though he was born in America, Thomas Stearns Eliot is one of the greatest poets in the English language. During this week I have been thinking about four lines from his poem 'Choruses from the Rock'. He writes:

Why should men love the Church? Why should they love her laws?

She tells them of Life and Death, and all they would forget.

She is tender where they would be hard, and hard where they like to be soft.

She tells them of Evil and Sin, and other unpleasant facts.

On this day when we reflect on the ministry of Jesus, and the sacred ministry of deacon, priest and bishop, which flows from it, Eliot's radical question is very pertinent. "*Why should men love the Church?*" Why and how should we deacons, priests and bishops teach people in word and action to love the Church, the Body of Christ which is all the baptised. On the day we renew the vows of our ordination, we also reflect on what compelled us to offer ourselves for ordination in the first place? What has been our journey so far, and what sustains us in our own love for God and for his priestly people? "*Why should men love the Church?*"

Part of that reflection in Holy Week must surely be who and what brought us along a way, which is by definition a way of the cross. None of us like suffering or pain or discomfort, or worry or inconvenience. We wouldn't be truly human if we did. But following a crucified Saviour reminds us that nothing is wasted in the sight of God. The service of God is the sanctification of time. As we stop at the Stations of the Cross, it is worth our while to stop and think about what my

journey to the priesthood has been and what the journey I am still making involves.

“Here might I stand and sing:

No story so divine;

Never was love, dear King,

Never was grief like thine.

This is my Friend,

In whose sweet praise

I all my days

Could gladly spend”.

Each of today’s readings capture the powerful message from the prophecy of Isaiah which ‘formed’ the ministry of Jesus. They come from a time of desolation for the People of Israel. Jerusalem occupied. The Temple laid low. The people in exile again. Yet in the midst of all this the prophet can say: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted”*. Jesus takes these words and makes them his own in today’s gospel passage: *“This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen”*. They become the essence of who he is. They take us to the heart of this week, to the heart of the life of the Church and to the heart of the life of the priest. We are not keeping alive the memory of events which happened two thousand years ago, memories which fade further and further back into the past. Those saving events are being made present today, in the life of each believer, in the heart of each priest. *“This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen”*.

Poverty of spirit. Affliction of body, mind and spirit. Worries about employment. Concerns about Social Justice. Fear of Terrorism. The challenge of Refugees. These are the places of exile, the arid deserts of our own time. It is into those circumstances that the healing oil of God's anointed one brings the power of God's presence. This Year of Mercy has captured the mind and heart of so many people. I know how grateful they have been for the opportunities for Confession and Adoration, which have been offered through the 24 Hours for the Lord initiative, through the Station Masses and the pilgrimages through the Holy Doors.

This centenary year of the Diocese is also offering ways in which we can reach out and share our experience of the love and mercy of God. The opening of Cornerstone across the road later in the year will provide a place not just for social activities but for evangelisation, too, for the many hundreds of people who will increasingly walk up and down this street.

These, and many other things, remind us of the continuously unfolding nature of our vocation. Each deacon, priest and bishop will have his own individual vocation story. And the people we serve will tell their own story of our ministry as well – the memory of the Baptism celebrated, the funeral led, the comforting word, the healing presence. But the priesthood is not simply an individual story. It is a story of the community of the Church as well. I love the words of John McDaid the former Principal of Heythrop College in London when he said:

“Ministerial priesthood is not produced by the common priesthood of God’s holy people.... Ministerial priesthood is necessary if the baptised are to do what they are supposed to do.... which is to worship God in God’s way and not merely an amalgam of human aspirations. Ministerial priesthood is an expression of Christ’s service of his people, one of the life giving ways in which God ministers to them”. We worship God “Through Him and with Him and Him” so that “All Glory and Honour may be yours now and forever”.

“Why should men love the Church? Why should they love her laws?”

The presence of so many of you at this Chrism Mass is a very powerful expression of why we love the Church and its priesthood. At the end of the renewal of priestly vows, I ask the people to:

Pray for your priests,

That the Lord may pour out his gifts upon them

So that they may lead you to him

Who is the source of salvation.

T.S. Eliot puts that in a different way:

Now you shall see the Temple completed

After much striving, after many obstacles;

For the work of creation is never without travail;

The formed stone, the visible crucifix,

The dressed altar, the lifting light,

The visible reminder of invisible light.