



**Homily for the Mass of Chrism**

**17<sup>th</sup> April 2019**

**Cardiff Cathedral: St. David's Cathedral, Cardiff**

**Archbishop George Stack**

The opening sentence of every passage is very important, not least when it is a sentence from the gospel. We heard today in the gospel of Luke “Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day”. But where had he come from? The common understanding is that he had come from Capernaum where he lived and ministered for the last three years of his life. After Jerusalem, Capernaum was probably the most important place in the ministry of Jesus, especially following his rejection by the people of Nazareth “*A prophet not accepted in his own place*” (Luke 4:24). Nazareth is mentioned 15 times in the gospel. Capernaum is mentioned 16 times. It was a city on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, on the trading road from Damascus, the crossroads between East and West. No wonder the Romans occupied the area. This is where Matthew collected taxes for them. This is where the centurion asked Jesus to cure his son. “*Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof*”. The ruins of the synagogue, where Jesus spoke the Bread of Life Discourse, are still there. It was great fishing port. Hence the call of Peter, James and John. It was with them that Jesus seems to have made his home, the clue being given by the house church built over the home of the mother in law of Peter whom Jesus cured. In Mark’s gospel we read: “*When he returned to Capernaum ... it was reported that he was at home. And many were gathered that there was no more room, even at the door*” (Mark 2:1-3) So busy were the

crowds around the house listening to Jesus, that the friends of the paralytic man had to open a hole in the roof to let him down whilst asking for a cure. I wonder if this was the “Field Hospital” of which Pope Francis speaks.

In 2018, Michel Merkt produced a film called Capernaum, which won the Jury prize at the Cannes Film Festival. It is the story of a young Arab boy who decides to sue his parents for bringing him into the war-torn world which is the Middle East. In the Bible, the name Capernaum comes from Kafar Nahum meaning Nahum’s village. The subtitle of the film says it means “Chaos”. There may well be more chaos if Israel annexes the Golan Heights from Syria as President Trump suggests! Those strategic Golan Heights look right down on Capernaum, and on the Jordan, and on the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus came back to Nazareth “*where he had been brought up*”. In the midst of all the activity of his missionary life, he needed to get back to his roots. The best advice given by my old parish priest to another seminarian from the parish was “*Never forget where you came from*”. Never forget your roots. Never forget the values with which you were brought up. Remain grounded in what is authentic no matter what the distractions of life. When the disciples asked Jesus “Where do you come from?” he didn’t give them an address. He said simply “*Come and See*” with all that implies. To ask

where you come from is not just a question of geography or ethnicity. It is a question of identity and purpose. It takes us to that silent, hidden place deep within our hearts. Home is indeed where the heart is, amidst all the activity and complexities of life. We priests need Nazareth in our lives as well as Capernaum. We need to invite others into the priesthood by saying to them “Come and See”. How grateful I am to Fr. Paul Millar for the work of Vocations Director in recent years and those he has prepared for priesthood. As he steps down from this role, I am grateful to Fr. Nicholas Williams for undertaking this important work for the Diocese.

Priests and bishops don't choose where they live and work. They are sent to minister to people where they are needed. Is it too much to say that parishes and dioceses are a bit like Capernaum where we are very public figures. In Webster's Unabridged Dictionary. Capernaum is defined as “A confused jumble. A place marked by a disorderly accumulation of objects like the crowd outside the house of Peter”. Ministering to large numbers of people in a variety of different circumstances may often feel like that. Sometimes we get worn down when we think we don't have time for ourselves. And all that is true. The doctor and the teacher and the social worker and the police officer all go home at the end of the day. But the priesthood is not what I do. It is who I am. That is one reason why we need to create and

sustain Nazareth in our lives, the place of silence, the place of prayer, the place to be at peace with myself and with God, the place of personal renewal. One reason, of course, for our retreats and Days of Recollection, for our Ongoing Formation and mutual support of the presbyterate. It isn't always easy or desirable to live and work alone in the middle of Capernaum. The wonderful thing is, though, that almost without realising it, the parish and the people whom we serve almost weave a web of affection around us – and we around them. In the midst of all the ups and downs, we become part of their life story with baptisms and weddings and funerals and the worship of God which transforms even the most mundane things of life. I know that to be true by the volume of correspondence I receive when I have to ask a priest to leave one parish and move to another. For us it is like leaving home. For parishioners it's like losing a well-loved member of the family. Countless parishioners and the Diocese itself will give thanks to God for the ministry of Mgr. John Maguire who later this year retires from the administrative responsibilities of the priesthood in order to enjoy some Nazareth years at the end of a busy Capernaum ministry.

In the blessing of the Holy Oils and in the Renewal of Priestly Vows, your priests say they wish to continue serving the people in the Capernaum which is your parish and theirs. The

church might be crowded, as was the house of Peter's mother in law. The Health and Safety handbook may wish to re-assess the fire risk, not least in the tragic events at Notre Dame. It may even demand that the hole in the roof be repaired no matter what the cost - and the friends of the paralytic shouldn't be standing on the roof anyway! But the reality is that this is where the family of the church gathers, and shares, and reaches out and bears one another's burdens. (1Peter 2). The Holy Oils, and the ministry they symbolise, will help our priests and people alike to do just that.

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