

SERMON BY MARK BIRCH AT REG'S FAREWELL

Baptism of Christ

The descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus of Nazareth at his baptism is described by Peter, in the Acts of the Apostles, as an anointing. 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power', he says. At his baptism, we can say, Jesus was revealed as the Messiah, the Christ – two words, one from Hebrew, the other from Greek that imply the same thing – anointing; being rubbed with oil (to be very literal). If I may break into rhyme for a moment, anointing is God pointing; saying, in the words of Isaiah, 'Here he is', 'here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights.' God points to Jesus, anointing him so that all may see who he is and what he is for.

In the Church of England we have rediscovered anointing over the last century or more, coming from both the Catholic and the Charismatic ends of the spectrum, and now most baptisms include anointing with oil, as a symbol of the anointing with the Holy Spirit that Jesus received at the Jordan.

Being anointed is about being chosen, marked-out, and empowered for some particular work or role. In this country we still anoint our Monarch. I've seen the little phial that contains the special blend of oils and perfumes reserved for the purpose – one of the perks of being at Westminster Abbey. And, increasingly over recent generations, we have anointed those being ordained as priests – anointing their hands, most particularly, for the sacramental work required of them – baptising, blessing, consecrating bread and wine for the encouraging and building-up of God's people, His Church.

But as the Queen and any priest will probably tell you, being anointed is one thing; living up to that calling, being faithful to it, is quite another.

We are here to celebrate the Baptism of Christ in this season of Epiphany, but we are also here to thank God for one of his anointed priests, who has been faithful to that calling in this place for over 20 years.

Reg's hands have baptised and blessed and fed this congregation and the Brothers of the Hospital faithfully and devotedly, whilst other priests have come and gone – pause for clearing of throat.

I remember one parishioner telling me quite plainly, shortly after I arrived as priest-in-charge here, that she wanted Reg and not me to take her funeral – mostly because it was Reg she knew and trusted, but partly because she heard that I had a taste for incense, and she wanted none of that!

The fact that Reg is not averse to bells and smells clearly passed her by, but the point was clear – Reg demonstrated a commitment to this people and this place; he earned that trust; and it will be as difficult for many of you to lose him as I know it is difficult for him to leave.

Who else is going to regale us with tales of derring-do on the high seas and in the murky deeps? Who else will immortalise us in watercolour, or surprise us with a deep backhand lob? Who else will greet us in Russian, or pour us a generous Scotch?

Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately for Reg (time will tell), it will only be a relatively short journey to Gosport should we need to find him. We all wish him the most happy and fulfilling new life on Weevil Lane – no less. The name I trust has only historical significance – but still, it might be worth checking the biscuits before you take a bite.

His ministry will continue, of that I have no doubt. Priesthood is, quite properly, part of who he is; integral to his identity; not in any way limited to a particular job or role. When you are anointed, you are anointed for good. God does not have a retirement policy, and will, I am sure, find work for this servant to do, for as long as ever he can do it.

When God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, it was like an enormous celestial finger telling people then and now to look at this man; to watch him and what he does, and what happens to him. And God points us to Jesus because here, uniquely and supremely God shows himself; shows us what he is like, and what his purpose is for us.

Priests are anointed and pointed-out because they are called, in turn, to point endlessly to Jesus; in Baptism, in the Eucharist, at weddings and funerals, in visiting the sick, in preaching and preparing people for Confirmation; anointed hands endlessly pointing to the anointed-one. It's a difficult calling because most of us would much rather be pointing at ourselves; drawing attention to our own powers in the hope of being noticed, gaining advantage, getting-on. Heaven knows priests are as prey to this as anyone.

The priests who have had the greatest influence on me have been those with an almost transparent quality – who have a quietness of presence that points beyond themselves to the greater presence, the eternal presence of the one who said 'behold I am with you to the end of the age.' Any of us who have been ministered to by Reg, who have sat in his company, perhaps at a time of crisis, or been close to him at the altar, will know that quietness, that unassuming presence through which the compassion of Christ shines.

So we give thanks today for a priest who has pointed us faithfully to Christ; fulfilling his ministry here as an anointed minister of the gospel to the Hospital and to the Parish. But the point of an anointed minister, is not just to point to Christ, but for other people to be anointed, so that they too can point faithfully to him.

Whether you were rubbed with oil at your baptism or not, you have all been anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power. Let Reg's ministry among you continue to bear fruit by fulfilling the ministry of all the baptised; to point to Christ, to become more and more transparent to his presence, to be conformed more and more to his likeness, to be the Good News that we are anointed to be.

So, not for the first or the last time today, thank you Reg for all you have been to the Church gathered here. Thanks be to God for inspiring and sustaining Reg's ministry among us over so many years; and may the Holy Spirit continue to anoint you and those who minister among you with the power of unconquerable love, that Christ may continue to be known, worshipped and adored in the Hospital of St Cross and the Parish of St Faith.