

## **Holy Oil**

### **I: Oil of Baptism**

On Maundy Thursday, in Wakefield cathedral, Bishop Nick will bless three jugs of oil for distribution to every parish in the Diocese: one jug will contain oil for healing; another oil of Chrism and a third oil for baptism. Over the next three days I want to say something about these three kinds of oil.

I am going to start with what is described in the Maundy Thursday service as the oil for the signing with the cross at baptism. It is also sometimes described as oil of Catechumens. A catechumen is someone who is learning the faith and this oil is always used to anoint someone who is preparing for baptism; the anointing that follows baptism requires the Oil of Chrism.

In the liturgy of baptism this signing follows on from The Decision in which the candidate for baptism or the parents and godparents in the case of young children, respond to questions put to them by the priest. Three are couched in negative terms:

- Do you reject the devil and all rebellion against God?
- Do you renounce the deceit and corruption of evil?
- Do you repent of the sins that separate us from God and neighbour?

The three that follow are expressed in more positive terms:

- Do you turn to Christ as Saviour?
- Do you submit to Christ as Lord?
- Do you come to Christ, the way, the truth and the life?

The words that accompany the signing refer to the positive aspects as the priest says to the candidate,

Christ claims you for his own.  
Receive the sign of his cross.

And

Do not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified.

But the response of the congregation harks back to the negative aspects

Fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ  
against sin, the world and the devil,  
and remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life.

And so do the final words of the priest:

May almighty God deliver you from the powers of darkness,  
restore in you the image of his glory,  
and lead you in the light and obedience of Christ.

These words are often referred to as an exorcism although we think of an exorcism as being a little more dramatic and even frightening. It follows that this Oil of Baptism, sometimes called Oil of Catechumens, is sometimes referred to as the Oil of Exorcism. So the words we use indicate that the oil has a kind of protecting symbolism, preserving the candidate from the powers of evil. And this is picked up in the prayer that the Bishop will speak on Thursday as he blesses the oil:

Blessed are you, sovereign God,  
the protector of all who believe in you.  
Your anointed Son overcame the powers of evil  
when he was lifted high upon the cross.  
By the power of your Spirit may your blessing rest  
on those who are anointed with this oil in your name;  
as they come to the waters of baptism,  
may it be for them a sign of your defence in their fight  
against sin, the world and the devil,  
and bring them to share in Christ's victory.

The idea that we need defending from a malign foe, the devil, Satan, is found very strongly in the bible, perhaps most famously in the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent and the temptation of Jesus in the

wilderness and Jesus is depicted by the gospel writers as continually casting out devils. St Peter, writing to those who are preparing for baptism, sees the threat of Satan as a daily battle:

Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.

1 Peter 8:8-9

This is, of course more of a difficulty for us. We do not attribute sickness to the influence of devils or The Devil. And we are probably less willing to believe that there is a person or a creature who actively works for bad, opposing God himself.

But what we do understand is that free will is not all it is cracked up to be. So much of what we do is determined by nurture or nature, by our genes or our DNA or by the influences worked upon us by our parents – and all can be for good or ill.

This is most tellingly expressed by St Paul in his letter to the Romans. Perhaps surprisingly he does not blame the devil:

For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

Romans 7:15-20

That is my story; I make decisions but I make the wrong ones even though I want to make the right ones because there is some powerful force thwarting me, misleading me. Perhaps it does not matter whether

we call it sin or Satan. The reality is there. And the baptism service recognizes that.

There is very little evidence that oil was used this way in New Testament times. In fact the only evidence I could find is this:

So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Mark 6:12-13

You could understand this to mean that casting out demons and anointing the sick were two quite different activities. But we know that throughout the New Testament Jesus sees a close connection between sickness, sin and Satan, and in this particular passage healing and casting out demons are all mentioned in the same breath as if they are actually the same activity. It is not unreasonable to see this episode as the use of oil to cast out devils.

Three hundred and fifty years after the time of Jesus a bishop called John Chrysostom describes the use of oil in Baptism:

Renouncing the devil, the candidates have changed their allegiance and publicly enlisted with Christ. It is for this reason that the Bishop anoints you on the forehead and marks you with the seal to make the devil turn away his eyes. He does not dare to look at you directly because he sees the light blazing from your head and blinding his eyes. From that day onwards you will confront him in battle and this is why the Bishop anoints you as athletes of Christ before leading out into the spiritual arena.

The Church of England's official liturgy, Common Worship, mentions in its notes the reference to athletes preparing to race; but I love the idea that the light shining from my forehead blinds Satan and renders him ineffective: I need that kind of protection.

N Clews  
26th March 2018

## **Holy Oil**

### **II: Oil of Chrism**

I spoke yesterday about Oil of Baptism whose purpose was, according to the prayer used by the bishop in blessing it, 'a sign of [God's] defence in [our] fight against sin, the world and the devil.' Today I want to talk about the Oil of Chrism whose purpose is altogether more joyful:

a sign of joy and gladness as [we] share in the royal priesthood of the New Covenant and make known the kingdom of Jesus Christ our Lord.'

It is also an oil which is well known to biblical writers. So, Aaron and his sons are consecrated with oil, set apart for their ministry as priests (Ex 30:29). Above all kings are anointed: Saul is anointed by Samuel (1 Kings 10:1) ; David is anointed by Samuel (1 Kings 16:13) Jehu is anointed on the orders of Elisha (2 Kings 9:1). There was a strong sense the person anointed was set apart by God himself, so strong that when David was fleeing for his life from Saul and he had the opportunity to kill his enemy he refused with the words:

The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the Lord's anointed, to raise my hand against him; for he is the Lord's anointed.

1 Samuel 24:6

The oil serves not only to set the King apart but also to equip him for service, to allow God's spirit to fill him so that he can do what God calls him to do. So, when David is anointed as King we read that

the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.

1 Samuel 16:13

Oil of Chrism is not mentioned much in the New Testament – Jesus and the gospel writers are not much concerned with kings and priests. But the idea of being anointed runs through the gospels because the title 'The

Christ', 'the Messiah', means The Anointed One, the one chosen by God for service. The sign of Jesus's being chosen is not being anointed with oil but the appearance of a dove at his baptism and a voice from heaven:

And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Mark 1:10-11

The sign of the Spirit, the oil, is absent but the reality of the Spirit is there, so much so that the modern Anglican ordinal refers to this experience as being an anointing, despite the absence of oil. As the Bishop anoints the newly ordained priests he says:

May God, who anointed the Christ with the Holy Spirit at his baptism, anoint and empower you to reconcile and bless his people.

At the heart of anointing with Chrism is service. Kings and Queens are anointed; Bishops and Priests are anointed; and you are anointed. Or rather those who are confirmed are anointed. The words of confirmation are very simple:

Confirm, O Lord, your servant with your Holy Spirit.

The scriptures make it very clear that gift of the Holy Spirit is to equip for service and to mould our character. To make us more Christlike in both our attitudes and in the way we serve.

In a few moments time there will be the opportunity for you to be anointed with Oil of Chrism that you may be filled with the Holy Spirit. I would like you to give some thought and prayer as to what you would like the Spirit to do for you. Perhaps you need to become a little more Christlike in your attitudes. Paul's letter to the Galatians provides a useful checklist of such attitudes – he calls them fruit of the Spirit:

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity,  
faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Galatians 5:22

Or perhaps there is some area of service you need to do which you find difficult: service to a neighbour, a friend, a member of the congregation; service in a personal capacity; service on behalf of the church.

Anointing for service is not a unique event, confined to confirmation or ordination. We need to be continually refreshed by the Spirit because the needs of the world and the evils of the world are always sapping us, draining us, exhausting us. We can never have too much of the Spirit. But we need to know what it is we want of him.

### **Prayer over the Oil**

Blessed are you, sovereign God and eternal Father,  
upholding by your grace all who hear your call.  
Under your Old Covenant priests and kings were anointed to serve you  
and in the fullness of time you anointed your Son by the Holy Spirit  
to be the Christ, the Savior and Servant of all.  
By the power of your Spirit may your blessing rest  
on those who are anointed with this chrism in your name;  
let it be for them a sign of joy and gladness  
as they share in the royal priesthood of the New Covenant  
and make known the kingdom of Jesus Christ our Lord,  
to whom with you and the Holy Spirit  
we lift our voices of thanks and praise.

N Clews  
26th March 2018

## **Holy Oil** **III: Oil of Healing**

The third oil, that for healing, is undoubtedly the one that we hear most of in the New Testament. This is, no doubt, because a great deal of Jesus' ministry is focused on healing. For Jesus there was always an association of healing with casting out demons and so we find that the use of oil relates to both when the twelve apostles go out on their own:

They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Mark 6:13

St James has a great deal to say about healing:

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.

James 5:13-16

There are some dramatic verbs here: those who are sick can be 'saved', 'lifted up', 'forgiven' as well as healed. In our own time we have tended to treat sickness as a minor mechanical trouble that can be fixed with a pill, a painkiller, or an antibiotic. James clearly has a more holistic view in which sin lays a part.

Now mentioning sickness and sin, or healing and forgiveness, in the same breath requires great sensitivity. It would be utterly insensitive to suggest that any individual case of illness is caused by sin. But if I were to look holistically at my own health, I might conclude that when I am anxious, cannot sleep, troubled with a headache, then the solution might lie less in a paracetamol and more in taking life a little more slowly,

sending a little more time with God in prayer. In society as a whole diabetes is looking to be a major problem in coming generations. Perhaps the solution lies less in copious use of insulin and more in changing the quality and quantity of what we eat. And exercising more. Or perhaps we can take it further and ask why so many of us over eat and eat so much of the wrong stuff. Is it to compensate for poor self image?

Is the solution to hear our Father in heaven speak the same words as he spoke to his Son at his baptism:

You are my son, you are my daughter, my beloved,  
with whom I am well pleased.

(cf Matthew 3:17)

Words of affirmation can sometimes take a strange form. There is a striking encounter between Jesus and a man who has been seeking healing for thirty eight years. Jesus asks him what may seem to us to be a strange question:

"Do you want to be made well?" 7

The man's reply is just the kind of reply we hear in every day life. He does not reply 'Yes!' or even 'No' but gives a reason why it has not been healed:

"Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me."

Is it a reason? Or an excuse? Jesus' response is quite abrupt:

"Stand up, take your mat and walk."

And he does! (John 5) Sometimes loving people is about telling them to get off their backsides! Sometimes words of affirmation are about telling people that they can take responsibility for themselves. Their lives need not be determined by outside malign forces.

This is certainly expressed in the prayer that the Bishop uses over this oil. Healing is not the curing of a mechanical malfunction. Instead it is about being 'renewed by the Spirit', 'breaking the power of evil', being 'set free from sin and death' and 'restored in God's image' and 'renewed in his love'. If this is healing, I want it!

### **Prayer over the Oils**

Blessed are you, sovereign God, gentle and merciful,  
creator of heaven and earth.  
Your Word brought light out of darkness,  
and daily your Spirit renews the face of the earth.  
Your anointed Son brought healing  
to those in weakness and distress.  
He broke the power of evil and set us free from sin and death  
that we might praise your name for ever.  
By the power of your Spirit may your blessing rest  
on those who are anointed with this oil in your name;  
may they be made whole in body, mind and spirit,  
restored in your image, renewed in your love,  
and serve you as sons and daughters in your kingdom.

N Clews

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