

Homily for the 4th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2024 Year B

The Gospel which we have just heard, about Jesus going into the synagogue and reading out that special passage from the Prophet Isaiah, will always have a special meaning for me. It was part of the gospel to be read on the Sunday I celebrated my first mass as a priest. That was 50 years ago this Sunday, and if I'm honest, I do not know where those 50 years have gone.

I do remember the day very well though. I was so nervous about saying mass for the first time by myself in front of a large church full of people, that I had a pain in my chest., and I know that I thought, "all those years of preparation and training and you go and have a heart attack at your first mass". What wonderful timing! I do remember that I was so preoccupied beforehand that I hadn't had time to check the Gospel. So, when I actually got up to read it, those words from Isaiah really hit me. Christ stood there and deliberately chose a passage that summed up his vocation, and there I was, right at the beginning of my ministry, literally acknowledging as I read those words, what my life would now be as well.

The day before, I had been anointed as a priest., the Spirit of the Lord had certainly been given to me, and I had publicly been commissioned to preach and teach the Gospel, and to be reminded of that, In that way, was awesome. Now every time I hear that passage it brings it all back to me.

The point I want to make is this, that what was true for me, is also very true for each and everyone of you as well.

Everyone of those words, relevant to Christ in His role as Messiah, are also relevant to me in my role as a priest and just as relevant to each one of you in your vocation as a Christian.

The passage of time, cares and worries have probably meant that you have all but lost a real sense of awareness of how very special you are in God's sight.

It is not just mere words, but in the whole history of the universe there has never been and never will be again the unique person that is you.

God has formed you, shaped you and now hold you in the palm of His hand.

You, with all your faults and failings, will never cease to exist, an awesome thought.

In Baptism and Confirmation, you too have been anointed and given the Holy Spirit. That is the root and identity of your Christian calling. You are 'Temples of the Holy Spirit', as Saint Paul puts it.

Now, I believe that an awful lot of our problems start when we lose sight or lose an awareness of our own basic Christian dignity and worth, and worse still, when we lose sight of it in others.

Thus starts the vicious spiral of animosity, hate, aggression and even violence. If we have little reason for self-love (in its best sense) and self-respect, then there is less reason to accord it to others. And up go all the defences.

And I suppose that it is partly the reason for the programme of action in the second part of the passage from Isaiah.

It is not just enough to be anointed and receive the Holy Spirit; the fruit of those gifts is action: nominal Christianity is tantamount to non-Christianity.

The old sardonic question applies, "If you were accused in a court of law of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you"?

To become fully who we are, other Christians, living in Christ, we must first recognise Christ in ourselves and then bear him to each other and see him in each other.

The programme is there: bring the good news to the poor, liberty to captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed and hope.

We must do it to ourselves first before we can do it to others.

We should read and acquaint ourselves with the Gospels, the teachings of Christ, to make our faith come alive, to learn what it is to see and judge clearly, to sensitise and educate our consciences, to learn to free ourselves spiritually from all that will enslave us and oppress us, and to learn the value of hope. Once we have begun to establish those virtues in ourselves, we can begin to share them with others.

The story is told of how a little girl, with great curiosity, watched as a sculptor chipped away at a large block of stone. Days later when she came back to see the completed work, a large roaring lion, she was wide eyed in astonishment.

She asked a very simple, direct question of the sculptor, “How on earth did you know that lion was trapped inside that block of stone?”

And that about sums it up. It is our task and vocation to see and liberate within the blocks of stone that we have become, the unique and beautiful person that is called and loved by God. Having found that true self inside us we then must seek to liberate that same quality and beauty and loveliness in others.

The task of a good life is to be who we really are, and always the best of who we are.