**Sermon for The Eucharist of the Chrism and Reaffirmation of Vows preached in the cathedral on Maundy Thursday the 6 April 2023**

1 Samuel 3.1-10

Revelation 1.5b-8

Luke 7.36-50

## I have to say that I nearly didn’t make it to this service. You see, I’ve just been to our brothers and sisters in the Channel Islands to do their Chrism Masses: one on each island and a Confirmation for 20 in Guernsey. Now Guernsey airport has a brand new security scanner and are showing Jersey up. Everyone in Guernsey is very proud of it. It looks like the space station, and it can scan for everything in one go. Each traveller has to pass through a special booth and, if there is any concern, the lights change to red. Well, that happened to me and so I waited to be frisked. That duly happened, but still the security staff were not satisfied with me. I became a person of interest. So then I was taken to another machine and a kind of electronic paper swob was put on my hands and on my shoes. They put the result back into the new machine and then the alarms started going off and warning signs were drawing the attention of the others punters looking on with that ‘glad it’s not me’ look. Just for clarity, I wasn’t in uniform. The staff team tried it again and I was asked if I’d handled any explosives recently. Now I know it’s been busy, but I think I would have noticed that. We tried the whole procedure again but still I was alarming. Then the supervisor came over with his clipboard and a series of questions for me. We weren’t getting anywhere. Then he asked me what was the purpose of my visit. You know that sinking feeling, brothers and sisters, when someone asks you what you do for a living? So I began to explain that I am the Bishop for the Channel Islands and that I’d come to confirm and bless holy oils. That didn’t work. Finally, deciding actions speak louder than words, I put my hand on the head of the supervisor and told him about anointing at Confirmation with the Oil of Chrism. On the verge of arrest, he leaned over to the machine, typed in olive oil to the allowed substances, and, bingo, I was approved and no longer seen as a terrorist threat. You see my hands were apparently still impregnated with the Oil of Chrism. The superintendent signed his document, asked for a blessing and sent me on my way. If carrying the substance of Chrism is my crime, then I am guilty as charged.

I am here, and you are here, and thank God for that. This is the first time this service has happened without restrictions since 2019. I well remember conducting parts of this service as Dean of Gloucester from my computer screen, looking up at a locked cathedral, dressed as I was in cassock alb and slippers. What a joy it is to come together and to renew our ministry at such an important time. So what is our time? What is this season that our renewed calling is being tasked by God for? I believe this is not a post-Covid time, it is a proto-post-Covid time. We are not out of this yet. Death is no longer our lockdown fear but the consequences and the outwash of the last few years are still to be discovered. This has been the biggest negative event of our lives. Because of this, our society is anxious and our Church is fractious just at the time that we are needed most, just at the time when God is calling us to love one another and wash one another’s feet.

Think of our times post Covid. Instead of a renewed spiritual awakening and selfless service, we have war in Europe again; three prime ministers in the time of less than a year that I have been a Bishop; the death of our beloved late Queen and soon a Coronation. We have a cost-of-living crisis with cold homes and priced out food, public services in meltdown alongside industrial action and a general lack of patience all-round. It is into this that we are called, called to wrap towels around ourselves and wash dirty, tired feet.

So who are we, and what is our calling? For all of our unworthiness, we are called to be the people of Jesus: Christians. How easily we forget that or take it for granted. When it matters most, we need to return to the person who matters most: Jesus Christ. Too often I feel we crowd out the Jesus of the Gospels with our own theologies and fears. We have a simple task; we are called to Make Jesus Known. There really isn't much else to be concerned about in our times.

## So last week, at a Bishop’s Council two day meeting, we drew together all the work that well over a hundred of you have been sharing in to discover our new diocesan purpose and plan or vision and strategy. There is still loads more detailed work to do, but we are convinced as a Bishop’s Council that the Spirit is leading us to a new and exciting place. As the work continues, we hope, no, we will have all this in place by the time Archbishop Justin visits us in June. Then we can stop talking about purpose and plan, about good decisions and strong trusted accountability, and just get on with the job of Making Jesus Known. That is going to be our diocesan strapline: Making Jesus Known, and I defy even members of the Church of England to disagree over that one! Our vision is this: To make Jesus Christ known in every place so that all might flourish and grow, seeking his Kingdom, here and now. Rooted in Luke 4 and the Nazarene manifesto, we will commit ourselves to Courageous Christian Leadership, to Challenging Injustice, to Creative Partnerships in Local Mission, to Championing Climate Justice, and, as a foundational principle, to Financing the Future Sustainably. There is loads more work to do and thank you for sharing in it. We will be Simpler, Humbler and Bolder and we will be about incarnationally rooted evangelism with the emphasis on local action rather than top down imposition. Nothing, especially our own internal distractions, should deflect us from this. In this way, with so much diversity among us but with the unity for which Christ prayed running through our veins, we shall wash feet and invite people to come and see Jesus - not the Church, but Jesus. There is much to do and much to pray about, but our season demands of us to trust one another and to minister to the cure of souls which is both yours and mine.

## And yes, that means everyone. When you read the Last Supper Gospel later today, see what Jesus did with those he knew were about to betray him. He washed their feet and ate with them. We should be more like Jesus and make him known. The woman, who was a sinner, stood behind Jesus weeping, fully aware of her shortcomings. No-one needed to keep judging her; she knew. She bathed Jesus’ feet with her tears. You and I are not asked to do that. The rule makers tried to stop her but Jesus just pointed to her great love. We are called to that. And Jesus forgives her, forgives you and forgives me, because of love. The one of whom little is forgiven, loves little. Jesus says her faith has saved her. May our loving faith save us.

In a moment, we shall bless oils for the initiation and healing of the people Jesus has given you. There is another oil that we shall bless. You are that oil. The oil, the balm of ministry, is who you are. The tears of your sacrifices are gathered together in a jar. The sweat of your ministry is fermented into a perfume. The grace of your patience is nurtured into a soothing cream. Your ministry, the ministry we share, is the oil of gladness. Everyone ought to be able to detect the oil of gladness upon us. If we but work together, if we live faithfully, if we share burdens, if we listen and if we love above anything else, then you, each one of you, is the oil of gladness. Everything you touch, everyone you meet, every encounter is oil from the palm of the crucified Christ. This is it, there is nothing else, we are the oil of gladness for this our time. All we have to do is to put ourselves to one side in Making Jesus Known. And then we, and all God’s people, will be healed. Team Salisbury - you are the oil of gladness.

*+Stephen Sarum*