

A sermon for Pentecost 2017 when the parish also celebrated the birthday of HM Queen Elizabeth II

The Day of Pentecost is the culmination of the long sequence of Sundays and holy days we began way back on 1<sup>st</sup> March this year. Those days, those weeks, teach us yet again the story of Jesus: dead, buried, raised to new life, ascended to God's heavenly realm and now poured out upon the Church in the gift of ever present Holy Spirit.

And today we also mark the birthday of Queen Elizabeth, an annual commemoration here at St George's. It's an interesting convergence.

It set my mind to thinking about the long standing connections in both Jewish and Christian practice between anointing with holy oil and the gift of Holy Spirit.

In Israel, priests and kings were anointed with olive oil set apart for no other purpose. The anointing of Solomon, successor David the shepherd boy who was chosen and anointed by the prophet Samuel, is remembered in the Coronation service. Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anointed Solomon and even as I say those words I bet you can hear Handel's stirring anthem in your head!

In Israel as in Britain, the anointing of the monarch is both a sacred act and a political one. It is a one of the five key moments in the Coronation Service. It occurs after the reading of the gospel. In 1953, that moment was considered so sacred that four knights of the garter held a canopy over the Queen to shield our ordinary eyes from seeing it televised.

But the anointing of temporal kings is not all that is recalled. The prayer that accompanies the Archbishop of Canterbury's ritual action begins by recalling that Jesus was anointed by God. I think it worth hearing that prayer and the rubric that goes with it:

**Then shall the Dean of Westminster lay the Ampulla and Spoon upon the Altar; and the Queen kneeling down at the faldstool, the Archbishop shall say this Blessing over her:**

Our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the Son of God,  
who by his Father was anointed with the Oil of gladness  
above his fellows,

by his holy Anointing pour down upon your Head and Heart  
the blessing of the Holy Ghost,  
and prosper the work of your Hands:  
that by the assistance of his heavenly grace  
you may govern and preserve  
the Peoples committed to your charge  
in wealth, peace, and godliness;  
and after a long and glorious course  
of ruling a temporal kingdom  
wisely, justly, and religiously,  
you may at last be made partaker of an eternal kingdom,  
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Now tell me God does not answer prayer!

To speak of Jesus as 'the Christ' it is not to use a surname but a designation; he is *christos*, a Greek word meaning the anointed one. That's what the image of a dove descending on Jesus at his baptism tells us. In his baptism, the Spirit of God came upon Jesus, the voice of God affirmed him, and confirmed his calling to be the One to visit and redeem his people, the whole human race.

In our baptism, we too are anointed with fragrant olive oil that is consecrated by the diocesan bishop in Holy Week. That's one of the oils I present to the parish on Maundy Thursday. The other is simple olive oil for anointing the sick and more about that in a moment.

When a person is baptised or confirmed, they or their godparents if they are too young to do so, say 'yes' to God's desire to share life in all its fullness with them. How a person baptised responds to that desire is their responsibility. God always holds the door open. Our relationship with God is two way traffic but God takes the initiative. It is the Spirit who enables us to cry out to God as a child to a trusted and reliable parent.

There is no magic in anointing, but there is promise. Anointing symbolises God's faithfulness in keeping what God promises. Anointing is a kind of seal, like a mark on a document guaranteeing its authenticity and bringing about what it says it does. God has let us

know that Jesus is raised from the dead so that we can trust God's promise, now kept, to visit and redeem this broken and divided world. In the Netflix series *The Crown* there is a scene where King George VI explains to his daughter what anointing means for a monarch. He tells her that 'when the holy oil touches me I am transformed and brought into direct contact with the divine... forever changed and bound to God.'

God gifts us with Spirit so that we can be changed, the fruit of the Spirit's gifts transforming us as we open our hearts and lives to God and allow God to work in us what is pleasing in God's sight.

Those fruits are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Each gift is a share in God's true character remaking us in God's image and likeness.

And, a word about anointing of the sick. Right from the outset Christians were urged, in the letter of James, to seek God's aid and the support of the community in sickness and infirmity. Send for the elders - the leaders - James wrote, have them come and pray with you and anoint you with oil; and we still do so today. Any of you may ask for this ministry and I trust you will when necessary. The support of the parish's prayers in illness or struggle can make all the difference to our being able to bear it, and no one need feel alone at such times.

And how comforting must it be to receive anointing when our life draws to its earthly completion? Again, you, or your family have only to ask and the clergy from here will respond.

I hope there is some young priest around to do so for me.

Of course, if it is not possible, as one dying man famously said, 'Never mind, God's grace is present everywhere.' Our rites are not magic, but powerful symbolism that takes us into the reality of what they signify.

Today we can rightly give thanks that the anointing prayer during the Queen's coronation has been well answered. Queen Elizabeth is having 'a long and glorious course' and we have had the stability of her presence while governments and crises have come and gone. We humans appoint kings and governors and even bishops and vicars, but that is never enough. God anoints, and over time we discern the truth of

that or not, as each responds to God's choice and gives themselves to the refinement of fire and the joy only God can work in us, through the Holy Spirit given to us.

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