



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

Homily: Archbishop Bernard Longley

ST GILES' CATHOLIC CHURCH, CHEADLE, STAFFORDSHIRE, 12 FEBRUARY 2012

It is a year since I was last with you to celebrate Mass here at St Giles and I am grateful to the Parish Priest, Father Sandy Brown, for welcoming me back today.

Many things have happened in the intervening year – many events and celebrations that will have brought great joy into the life of this parish community - and at the same time the unfolding of some events that have undoubtedly brought their share of confusion, sadness and suffering.

I know that you will understand and appreciate that it cannot be my purpose in the course of preaching God's Word during this Mass to enter into great detail about all the events or news that have been so disturbing over recent days. But neither is it helpful to our spiritual wellbeing to try to block such things out entirely from our prayers and our worship in God's presence.

Today's Gospel emphasises that Jesus Christ is the one who brings wholeness and healing into our lives and the lives of all those who suffer as individuals or as communities. Sometimes a wound has to be exposed to the light of day before it can begin to heal.

The leper in St Mark's Gospel had to come to Jesus and show himself to the Lord before he could be healed. We are strengthened and re-assured when we see the compassion of Christ and his readiness to reach out with his healing touch: Feeling sorry for him, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.

I am offering this Mass especially for your intentions at a most difficult moment in the life of your parish. Yet it is also a moment when your witness as a Christian community is more than ever important.

It is never easy to be under scrutiny or to know that we are being watched critically by others, and yet it is in these very circumstances that we can reflect most powerfully the love of God that we ourselves have received and the faith that sustains us. This moment offers an opportunity to demonstrate our confidence in Christ's healing power, our trust in his forgiveness and our own compassion for all those who suffer.

It is important that we regularly hold in our prayers individuals, families and parish and local communities affected directly or indirectly by any betrayal of trust experienced in the Church.

It contradicts the Gospel that anyone should look for the presence of Christ - among us as one who serves - only for their faith in his Church to be undermined.

It can be a long and difficult journey to find peace of mind and to build up sufficient confidence once again to approach the Church's ministers in their search for spiritual guidance and support.

It is only right that we expect those who are ordained to reflect the compassionate presence of Jesus among us. I am grateful that our parish communities are very rarely disappointed in this expectation.

Our priests and deacons, together with those in formation at our seminaries, are motivated by a desire to be like our Lord. They wish to follow his example by having compassionate feelings for others and by reaching out as Jesus did.

I ask you to pray today for those who have pastoral responsibility in the Church that they may have the strength and wisdom to exercise it after the mind of Christ himself.

St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians gives us an important insight into the mind of our Lord – it helps us to see the motivation and pattern for true service.

St Paul offers us a picture not only of his own ministry but also a vision for our ministry in the Church that is powerful and moving: 'Whatever you do at all, do it for the glory of God. Never do anything offensive to anyone... just as I try to be helpful to everyone at all times... so that they may be saved.' That is a vision that sums up what the Church is called to be and what people should reasonably hope and expect to find within her.

During the Papal Visit in September 2010 and on the day before he came to Birmingham to beatify Blessed John Henry Newman, Pope Benedict XVI preached in Westminster Cathedral. In the course of his homily the Holy Father offered some powerful words which are a comfort to us today and which enable us to feel united with the Holy Father in his witness to the love of Christ.

Pope Benedict said: "I think of the immense suffering caused by the abuse of children, especially within the Church and by her ministers. Above all, I express my deep sorrow to the innocent victims of these unspeakable crimes, along with my hope that the power of Christ's grace, his sacrifice of reconciliation, will bring deep healing and peace to their lives.

"I also acknowledge, with you, the shame and humiliation which all of us have suffered because of these sins; and I invite you to offer it to the Lord with trust that this chastisement will contribute to the healing of the victims, the purification of the Church and the renewal of her age-old commitment to the education and care of young people."

Pope Benedict concluded: "I express my gratitude for the efforts being made to address this problem responsibly, and I ask all of you to show your concern for the victims and solidarity with your priests."

May these wise words help us to move forward and to witness over the coming weeks and months, ever more effectively, to the powerful presence of our Lord Jesus Christ in the midst of this parish community of yours which he loves and will always guide.