

Sermon for the closing Eucharist at 2026 Clergy Conference

The ancient liturgy speaks to the unity of the priests with their bishop, as oils which will be used throughout the diocese to anoint the sick and dying, and the newly baptized are blessed and taken out into congregations.

Something powerful happens when one is anointed with holy oil – in order to anoint the anointers hands also get oil on them, as they give, they receive and are formed in their faith.

This happened for me one year on New Year's Eve. I recall as if it were yesterday the request that came through late in the day to go to the hospital and baptize the first born son of a young couple. The much anticipated and already loved baby would not be going home to that 'happily ever after' life his parents had dreamed about.

My warden delayed her own New Year's Eve plans and went to the church where she gathered the items I needed for the service – a shell, a white stole, a candle, oil of chrism, and a linen towel.

The hospital parking lot and entrance, usually a bustling place, was unusually quiet for a New Year's Eve. I was escorted through the Neonatal ICU to where the baby was resting in his mother's arms. The proud father leaned in to his baby boy, his eyes not leaving him for a moment. This was only the third time the parents had held him outside of his life supporting bassinet.

The nurses had a white shawl and lacy cardigan on hand and had dressed the baby for the ceremony. They looked on from a distance, ever vigilant in their roles.

I listened as the parents shared their love story and of their hopes and dreams for a child to fill their lives. We prayed together and gave thanks for the gift of a son, even though their time together would be too short. And then I baptized him *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.... I took the oil of Chrism and signed him with the cross and marked him as Christ's forever....we receive you into the household of God...confess the faith of Christ crucified....proclaim his resurrection."*

Not even the click and hiss from neighbouring ventilators could alter the truth that the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit had become one of those 'thin places' where God's presence is tangible. And when I left I carried the oil of gladness home on my fingers,

and the smell of the scents in the chrism lingered and I held that baby and his family in prayer all night long.

Early on the Church adopted the use of a commonplace substance for its sacramental rituals – olive oil and its prolific use is well documented in the Bible. It was important in daily life and used as fuel for lamps, in cooking - particularly in making bread, and as a healing agent in medicine. Guests were welcomed in a Jewish home by having oil poured on their heads. Naomi tells Ruth to wash and anoint herself before going to the threshing floor to meet Boaz. (Ruth 3.3) Oil was used to prepare the dead for burial, to dedicate a memorial stone in honour of God, and to consecrate the meeting tent, the ark of the covenant, the table, the lampstand, the altar of incense, and to offer sacrifices. Something so ordinary when combined with prayer set something else apart and made it holy.

During the fifth century, in the North African town of Hippo, where Augustine (354-430) was bishop, Christians fasted on Holy Saturday and then in the evening brought oil lamps to the basilica for the vigil of the Lord's resurrection. Among them were catechumens, who had previously received instruction on the faith and were now to be baptized and receive their first communion. Before they were baptized they were anointed with oil symbolizing that person's need for the help and strength of God to sever the bondage of the past so that they may come to faith, come to baptism, come to live as a child of God.

The Scriptures attest to the spiritual symbolism of oil. St. James wrote, *"Is there anyone among you sick? He should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord."* (James 5. 14)

In the most beloved of all Psalms we read, "You anoint my head with oil," (Psalm 23. 5) signifying favour and strength from the Lord. When Samuel arrives at Jesse's home looking for the Lord's anointed one, he finds him in David, the youngest son and keeper of sheep. Samuel takes a horn of oil and anoints him with it, signifying his special designation from God as king of Israel. The practice of anointing kings and queens continues to this day with King Charles being anointed before God under a canopy in his coronation. That Coronation oil is kept in a safe in the Dean's residence at Westminster Abbey and is said to be a mixture of sesame seed and olive oil, and perfumed with roses, orange flowers, jasmine, musk, civet and ambergris.

1 Samuel 16. 13 tells us that in the moment of David's anointing the spirit of the Lord came 'mightily upon him' and he was empowered for the vocation to which God had called him and set him apart.

And this, of course is the context for today's Gospel passage as Jesus fresh from his baptism and his 40 day sojourn in the desert goes into the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. He'd done that many times before and often read from a scroll. On this occasion, in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah and steps into the public eye and his very public ministry of three years. The text he reads will become his mission statement as Messiah. *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. To proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."* (Luke 4. 18-19)

As he rolled up the scroll and looking out at those in the synagogue said, *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* (Luke 4.21)

For Luke, the stories of Jesus's baptism, temptation and the launch of his mission are Holy Spirit stories. The Spirit claims him and names him as God's beloved Son, tests him and empowers Jesus for the servant ministry that lies before him. Luke is telling us that it is the Holy Spirit who leads Jesus in saying 'no' to false options in the temptation story and 'yes' to a mission that is clearly God given. When Jesus reads Isaiah 61: 1-2 he is declaring that his ministry in the Spirit as Messiah of God is calling him to be an agent of mercy to the downtrodden in this world. He himself will be good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and a new beginning for all who have failed.

Much later, Luke will tell us in the early chapters of the book of Acts how the Holy Spirit came upon the believers at Pentecost and launched the church, of which we are now a part, in witness to the risen Christ. The implication of this text is that if we are going to study, interpret, and follow the gospel, that we should keep coming back to this text to measure our work.

In an article, 'Come Holy Spirit' the Rev. Joan Gray, former moderator of the Presbyterian church writes that the 'dunamis' (strength, power, ability) of the Holy Spirit was all that the early church had going for it. "It had no buildings, no budget, no paid staff, and very few members." Today we have the opposite...buildings, budgets, paid staff, members....and sometimes we forget about the Holy Spirit, wanting to do everything in our own strength, power and ability.

We need to hear this in our context and life together as church today. In baptism we received the gift of the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus did at His. We have been claimed us as

God's own and set us apart, clergy to do God's work in the world in the power of the Holy Spirit. We have been given this season and this time in the life of the church to do it.

As our time together in conference draws to a close, we leave with gratitude for the sacredness that has grown among us. Through holy listening, honest sharing, and conversations shaped by grace, this space has become more than a meeting place; it has become holy ground, one of those 'thin places' I described in the beginning of my sermon.

We have all been the recipients of the oil of gladness through the speakers who have offered us so much more than a thing, but their very selves. We have received the oil of gladness from each other. In the quiet attentiveness to one another's stories, in the courage to speak truthfully, and in the care with which we held each other's joys and burdens, we have encountered something deeper than ourselves.

At times like this, I often feel like blustery Peter who, said, "It's so good for us to be here, let me build us tents so we can stay forever." We must go down the mountain, and even though we do not really know where we are going, we do not fear because God leads the way.

Though we now depart to different places and callings, the spirit of this gathering goes with us as a precious oil, carrying the reminder that holiness is often revealed in the simple act of being fully present to one another.

You leave empowered by the Holy Spirit to be an agent of God's love and compassion declaring that God has given us no other day than today to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, release to the captives, and freedom to the oppressed. So go, confess the faith of Christ crucified and proclaim his resurrection.