



Homily for Mass of Chrism

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In this Jubilee Year of Hope it is good for us to ask ourselves in this most holy Week; what is the basis of our hope? What should give us hope?

I can't get out of my head something I heard the historian Tom Holland say in a YouTube conversation with Bishop Barron and others. Holland takes the stance of a secular historian who has begun to recognise the extraordinary influence that Christianity has had on modernity - and continues to have - even while modernity is vigorously trying to ignore it. He was asked by the Christians in the conversation for his opinion on how Christianity should be seeking to present itself today. His answer was: 'You must never forget or downplay just how WEIRD Christianity is.'

The idea that a carpenter from Nazareth in Galilee, who lived two thousand years ago was the eternal God in human form is, on the face of it, utterly bizarre. Then we are told that this God Man was taken as a criminal and subjected to crucifixion, the most barbaric form of public execution every imagined. Christians have taken the horrific image of this man dying or dead on the cross and turned it into their great symbol and they raise it up in a place of honour in all of their churches.

The Romans put up crosses and nailed conquered slaves to them in order to tell the world that Rome was all powerful, all conquering. Christians look at the very same symbol in order to remind themselves that, because of Jesus, there will be victory for the weak, glory for the humble and redemption for sinners.

The 'weird' or shocking quality of the Jesus phenomenon doesn't just begin on Calvary. The exciting edginess of Jesus is here already in the Synagogue of Nazareth in the scene we have just heard presented in the Gospel reading. Jesus is a local carpenter's son, well known to them, or so they think, but there is tension and excitement in the air and 'all eyes are fixed on him.'

He proclaimed the words from the prophet Isaiah that were used to speak of this year of the Lord's favour. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor... liberty to captives... new sight to the blind... to set the downtrodden free and to proclaim the Lord's year of favour."

The fact that the God of the Jews genuinely cares about the poor, the weak and outcast is already revolutionary. The Carpenter's son quotes Isaiah with eloquence and power; and then he drops the bombshell that seemed to go too far: "This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen!"

Jesus himself is Good News for the poor, liberty for captives, sight for the blind. Jesus is our hope.

But where do we find this hope today? In the world right now, there is a sense that the ground beneath our feet is shifting and unstable. We witness war and serious injustice in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan; so many of us feel a helpless rage as we call for an end to these senseless conflicts. Here in our own country we live with the constant scandal of assaults on the sanctity of life in the abortion regime, and now there is the threat of assisted suicide becoming law, carried on a wave of misdirected compassion that eclipses the truth about the sanctity of life.

Where, then, are our signs of hope?

I see them in you, my brother priests and deacons, and in the faithful who labour alongside you.

As I travel throughout our diocese, I witness priests of all ages giving leadership and inviting lay people to take more responsibility for the mission of the church. When I feared that our formation programs for parish leadership would attract only familiar faces, I discovered instead new people coming forward in every family of parishes. The Holy Spirit is calling forth new voices, new energy, new commitment.



In February I had the privilege of gathering with our Hospital Chaplains, both clerical and lay, in February. During our Conversation in the Spirit, I asked them to consider the times when their presence to patients and families was a witness to God's goodness and love. The stories they shared brought tears of surprise and joy to many eyes. In those hospital corridors and rooms Christ's presence is made manifest through their faithful ministry. When I visited the prison last month, I was aware of the same thing.

Our religious, many growing older, remain a marvellous leaven in our community. Wherever there is outreach to the poor, the sick, the homeless, you will see our Religious there, embodying Christ's preferential option for those on the margins.

I have commissioned many new Lay Funeral Ministers in recent months and already I am hearing reports of genuine ministries of consolation being shared with grieving families. In these moments of sorrow, Jesus in his Church is present bringing the light of resurrection hope.



A big part of my life since the New Year has been celebrating the Sacrament of Confirmation. It has been a great joy. In saying that let me not gloss over the frustration that we all feel at the low rates of practice after Confirmation. If our hope was rooted in ourselves alone the poor rate of retention would depress us. But it is not.

And so, I saw genuinely enthused, joy-filled children, parents who are wanting the best for their children; I delighted in the work of teachers who had taught them well, and, in every case, priests who are steadfast in wanting to pass on the faith to all the children of their parishes.



A special sign of hope comes from those young families that we do see in Church on Sunday. They represent the future, and in their commitment to raise children in faith, we witness the continuation of God's covenant with his people. Our ministry to these families is essential; they need our encouragement, our welcome, and our support as they navigate the challenges of nurturing faith in an often-indifferent world.

All of these signs of hope are seen precisely in the places of the greatest challenge, suffering and need. The paradox at the heart of our faith is that hope springs forth not from comfort and security, but from faithful presence in the midst of suffering and struggle.

The ministry of hope requires endurance, steadfastness. When the world seems shrouded in darkness, when our own strength fails, we remember that we are not the source of our hope - we are merely its witnesses. The hope we proclaim is not built on shifting sand but on the solid rock of Christ's death and resurrection.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux reminds us:

"Everything belonging to the earth is shifting and unstable, but our Rock is in heaven, and from it all our safety and stability derive."

The rock of the Christians is the Crucified One and, St Bernard goes on; *"where indeed are there complete security and rest for us frail people save in the Saviour's Wounds?"*

My dear brothers and sisters, particularly my brother priests as we renew our priestly promises today: this is the foundation of our hope. Not our own strength or cleverness, not our programs or initiatives, but the "weird and wonderful" Son of God who comes into our radically insecure world with a message of "Good news to the poor."

When we embrace the cross - not as a symbol of defeat but as the throne of victory - we become authentic ministers of hope. When we stand with the suffering, comfort the grieving, advocate for the vulnerable, and proclaim liberty to captives, we continue Christ's mission in a world desperate for genuine hope.

As we move on through this Jubilee Year I want to suggest a couple of concrete ways in which we support each other in living out the Hope to which we are called.

In the Month of June and especially in the nine days leading up to the Feast I am inviting the whole diocese to turn to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Last year the Novena to the Sacred Heart was a huge source of blessings for individuals, in families, schools and parishes. In this Jubilee Year we will dig deeper and spread the message more widely and expect many graces.

This Summer we are invited to go on pilgrimage.

- 1st June - Jubilee pilgrimage to Saul
- 8th June- Jubilee Pilgrimage to Knock
- 4th- 6th July Lough Derg Pilgrimage
- Mid July - Jubilee Pilgrimage to Lourdes.
- Sunday 10th of August-Diocesan pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes in Moneyglass.

Nobody has to go on all of these pilgrimages, but everybody should go on at least one. It is an outward statement of being a pilgrim people of hope, on the move together.

We renew our commitment to be witnesses of this hope - not by denying the reality of suffering, but by standing firmly within it, holding fast to the promise that even now, in our midst, the words of the prophet are being fulfilled. Perhaps the most hopeful thing about us Christians is that we continue, steadfastly, to embrace the WEIRD and wonderful message of a crucified God who transforms suffering into glory, weakness into strength, and death into eternal life; that message, the message of Jesus, our message is as revolutionary and hope-filled today as it was that first day in the synagogue of Nazareth.

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+ Alan M c Guckian SJ

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