

DIOCESE OF SALFORD

Bishop John Homily Mass of Sacred Chrism 2023

Today being something of a feast of priesthood, I need to address some remarks to my brother priests I'm by no means ignoring you, but the comments I make to them largely apply to all of us I think, in these days, so excuse me if turn my back on you, no rudeness intended.

My dear brother priests, I can't remember any mention of the word pandemic in any pastoral course I undertook in my seminary training. And I don't think I hear the word during the first 35 years of my priestly ministry. But then suddenly, it was there. It was the word, that was directing our lives, dictating to us how we might minister as priests, how we had to adjust. Who would ever have thought in our lifetime, that our churches would be closed down, that we would be isolated from one another, that people couldn't come to Mass. Extraordinary times. And I appreciate very much the initiatives that you showed in building up that sense of community in a different way in your parishes, in your ministries. Making sure people were in touch with one another, that the isolated weren't left alone. It was really courageous of you and thank you for all that you did.

And I'm sure there were costs too. That sense of being isolated. So many of our parishes now being one-priest parishes, we were alone. I was alone. And I certainly, looking back, I can see that I'm not sure I got all the priorities right for the diocese at all during the pandemic, but I hope you will forgive me for any mistakes that I made. But we're emerging from that time of pandemic. We're not clear of it, and it's going to be there as a shadow over us for a while to come yet. So, it's time for us to see a challenge. A challenge as to what we need to be now as priests in a changing world. What our people expect of us and for which they are so grateful to us in our ministry. How might we rethink things. Pope Francis is so clear, isn't he, about each and every one of us having our part to play, but we are in a changing world, where we need to think globally. We need to see where do the Gospel values fit in this 21st Century. How are we best able to promote and encourage people in faith?

That needs to be thought about. And it shouldn't just be me making decisions passing them on to you, to run your parishes. No, I think this is something that needs to include everybody. So, it's an ideal moment for us, I believe, to begin a Diocesan Synod. Now that might suddenly cause people to think "Oh, that's a lot of extra work". I don't think it is.

A synod is conversation and prayerful listening. And that, I think, will allow us to see what the Church needs to be in the Diocese of Salford in this new generation, this post-pandemic world. How best may we take those Gospel values and live them, and show by our example what they are, how we may encourage those in our pastoral care to be part of that building of church in our own time.

I want to thank you for all that you do, and I don't underestimate for one minute what the last three years have meant in priesthood. The changes, the demands, the way that hasn't been clear ahead in the way that we minister. But you've managed magnificently, and I thank you. But we can't simply think about returning to normal. The normal is gone. We now have to think about what the Holy Spirit is asking of us as priests in the Church today. So, at the end of this Mass, I will make a declaration beginning our diocesan synod. We'll take it step by step, and there's no great burdens laid on us. It'll be, for all of us quietly, prayerfully working together, listening to what the Spirit may be saying to us, so that we can guide the Diocese of Salford in its particular ministry and vocation into the future.

I'd like to thank too, all of you and all those you represent in the Diocese of Salford, for your continuing faith, for all that you've managed and achieved during the difficult times of pandemic. When so many initiatives in the church went way beyond the church into our local communities. And let's give thanks for the vision, and that prophetic vision of Pope Francis, who reminds us that we are missionary disciples, that each and every one of us has our own personal mission, and we must never doubt the impact that each and every one of us can have as we take our part in building the church in a world which has become quite individualistic, materialistic, consumerist, and we need to build back those values which are so important to us to flourish into the future.

As we celebrate Holy Week, perhaps we can think of those disciples who entered Jerusalem full of that sense of rejoicing – “We're here, it's all going to happen!”. And it didn't. Jesus was put to death. Where were they on Good Friday, thinking: “It's all over. Everything we thought was going to happen can't happen now he's dead! Was it all a big mistake?” And then, that joy, on Easter Sunday morning when the word is out. Women have seen Jesus and he's alive. That rebirth of hope. Let's you and I make sure that Easter this year has that sense of hope for our future, for all that God may be asking of us, particularly as a community in this diocese, but individually in our own lives. Because each and every one of us is indeed a Missionary Disciple, an ambassador for Christ in our day.