

Homily of Archbishop Peter Smith
from his Installation as the Archbishop of Southwark,
St George's Cathedral, 10th June 2010

A few weeks ago I was watching a rugby match back in Cardiff and the performance of one particular player kept me on the edge of my seat. He was incredibly agile, remarkably quick on his feet and ran rings round the opposing players, and I said to myself, "That lad's playing like a man inspired." It's a remark I'm sure we have all made at some time or other, either about a sportsman or woman, a brilliant musician, an actor or someone who has given a rousing speech. In those contexts we use the word inspired rather loosely to mean that we think the person concerned has had a sudden rush of adrenalin or an unexpected and quite remarkable insight.

But a great achievement or performance doesn't come out of the blue. The brilliant sportsman has trained and practised hour after hour, week after week, away from the public gaze. So it is with the musician or actor or public speaker. Their "inspired" performance is in fact the fruit of long, dedicated and patient hard work. So it was with Christ when he first spoke in public to the people of his own town. He had spent years in silent and prayerful preparation for this moment which began his public ministry. It was certainly inspired, and the people were astonished, but what he said was not what the people wanted to hear. Luke tells us that a little later on, when they had absorbed what he had said, the people flew into a rage, threw him out of the town and took him to the top of the mountain in order to throw him down.

There are those in our own times who would like to see people of faith thrown down too. We are living at a moment in our history when our society is marked by deep struggles about its identity, values and purpose. It's a society in which religion and religious faith are increasingly under attack from the philosophers and the "worldly wise" of our times. Religious faith, and all that flows from it, is all too often perceived at best to be simply a legally permissible but private eccentricity; allowable only behind closed doors, but not in any way to be given expression in public life, the workplace or in the field of education. The historic, present, and future value of religion to the secular and spiritual life of the country has come under increasing criticism, and is often summarily

dismissed as irrelevant and even dangerous. At the extreme, there are those who represent an aggressive secularism or an anti-theism, which asserts a vision of a secular society completely free of religion and its influence.

In the words of the Jesuit theologian, Fr. James Hanvey: “Part of this approach is to construct a version of religion, especially Catholicism, that not only makes it strange to the secular mind but presents it as a threat. . . Religion in general, but the Church in particular, comes to stand for all the deepest fears and demons of a liberal secularism: it is prejudiced, oppressive, irrational, authoritarian, and capable of inspiring fanatical violence and abusing power.”

However, the reality is that the Church is not a threat to the legitimate independence and proper role of the secular State. The ambition of the Church is to see every person flourish and achieve his or her full potential, irrespective of race, religion, colour or creed. And, in the light of the Gospel, she has a clear vision of what religion and faith can offer to a confused and fragmented society and world. The Church, and by Church I mean all the baptised, by virtue of her God-given mission, must be passionately engaged in expressing that vision, because she wants humanity to succeed, not fail. That mission is to shed the light of Christ in the world of our times and to bring people to the knowledge of the truth - the truth of what it means to be human, the truth about the purpose of human life, the truth of God’s unconditional love for everyone without exception. That was the mission of Christ; that is the mission he passed on to all of us, when we received the Holy Spirit in the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation.

Sadly, for many people today that light of Christ which should shine out so clearly in the Church has been dimmed, particularly by the revelation of the terrible wrong which has been done by priests who have abused innocent children, and who have felt a deep-rooted sense of betrayal and violation by priests whom they trusted. The humiliation and shame of this wicked and scandalous behaviour has touched every member of Christ’s body, the Church; the innocent as well as the guilty. As St. Paul says in his Letter to the Romans, “If one part of the body is hurt, all parts are hurt with it.” The wounds in Christ’s body bleed for the innocent victims, for the sins committed by some priests, and for the failures and errors of judgement of some Bishops.

These revelations are a stark reminder of the truth that the Church is a Church of saints and sinners, constantly in need of redemption and reformation. Yet we know it is also true that in spite of the weakness and failures of individuals, and at times the institution of the Church, it is within the Church that the risen Christ continues his redeeming work through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. That surely is the reason we rejoice in being members of the Church, imperfect though she is; not because we have any exaggerated claim to personal holiness, nor because we hold to a false optimism that we shall achieve perfection through our own efforts. But because we understand and readily acknowledge that we are all sinners, in need of the redeeming grace of Christ won for us in the Paschal Mystery of his passion, death and resurrection, and available to us through the mystery of the Church.

Yet in difficult times, we, like the disciples during Christ's Passion, can be tempted to run away and hide, rather than courageously face up to the challenge of renewal and purification. We can too easily become disheartened and discouraged, or even feel completely overwhelmed. Our faith can be shaken, our energy diminished and our zeal in proclaiming the Gospel can begin to fade. The Apostles who were so close to Christ sometimes experienced these feelings when faced with adversity, as they did when they thought their boat was sinking and the good Lord was soundly asleep in the stern. "We are going down!", they said. They were convinced that Jesus didn't know what was happening to them or that he didn't care. But Jesus calmed the storm and rebuked them. "Why are you so frightened? How is it you have no faith?"

I have no doubt that the faith of the Church is alive and active today. It is manifested in the lives of so many good and holy laypeople, in the vibrant life of our parishes and religious communities, and in the dedicated and selfless ministry of our priests and deacons. It is being fulfilled day by day in the work of our Catholic schools and colleges, organisations such as CAFOD, the Justice and Peace Networks, the groups and agencies which support marriage and family life, and the different caring agencies and individuals in our dioceses who serve the poor, prisoners, refugees and asylum seekers and who care for the elderly and the sick. In these and in many other ways in the everyday life of the Church we see the working out of Christ's mission "to

bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free and proclaim the Lord's year of favour."

So I simply want to say to you today, "Be of good heart!" Never forget the words of the Lord, "I am with you until the end of time." I suggest to you that our prayer each day should be, "Open my ears that I may hear. Open my eyes that I may see. Open my heart to receive your transforming and purifying Spirit." The fruit of that co-operation with the Spirit, and with one another, will be that we are gradually transformed into the "light of the world, "the salt of the earth." In that process of renewal in the whole Church, called for by Pope Benedict, we have much hard work to do. With the empowering grace of the Holy Spirit, I firmly believe that work will bear fruit, fruit that will last, if all we do is rooted in the prayer of Christ himself: "Father, let your will be done, not mine."