

St Mary Abbots, Eucharist, Baptism Sunday

Trinity 14, Luke 16:1-13

Father Christopher

Everyone knows that the pouring of water, or the plunging into it, in more dramatic style, is at the heart of the baptism rite. But also critical is the anointing with oil, which comes first, and is a rather quieter ritual.

The anointing with oil comes loaded with symbolism. Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, anointed Jesus's feet with a vast quantity of oil, using her hair, as a prefiguring of his death. Bodies are anointed, and one aspect of baptism is the dying to the old life of sin, and the rising to the new; something that can be particularly hard for us to get our heads around when it comes to the very young. That is not however my focus for today.

Another meaning of anointing with oil however, is the setting aside for a particular purpose. Our late Queen is known to have attached particularly profound importance to her anointing, more so even than her crowning. While she would leave and enter Westminster Abbey in great robes, leaving of course wearing the crown that now rests on her coffin, and holding the orb and sceptre which also adorn it, at the moment of anointing she was simply wearing a white shift. And that moment was thought by her to be so holy that it was hidden from the cameras by a canopy. And the young woman whom she then was, was seen as just that – without the panoply of state. Her then young body was marked with the cross of Jesus, on her head, her hands and on her heart. That set her aside for a holy purpose, for the whole of her life, until it would be an old head that could no longer bear the crown physically, but before whom it would be carried. The mark of the anointing would however remain.

It is not only kings and queens who are anointed however.

Priests and bishops are, to set us apart for the ministry of the Church, and for handling holy things on behalf of the people of God. All of us who are baptised into the Church of God are anointed, because we are - all of us - set aside for that holy thing which is living the Christian life. This is a calling as Holy as the calling to reign or the calling to priesthood. And, in fact, we believe primarily in the priesthood of all believers, which those of us in holy orders simply represent. And that most fundamental calling, and setting aside for that calling, comes before all other callings.

For The Queen even, her most basic calling was that of Christian, before that of Queen. Indeed, that setting aside as a baby, in her christening, when she was anointed for the first time, on 29th May 1926, is what sustained her in her later ministry to us as our Queen, as she was increasingly eloquent and explicit about in her Christmas broadcasts. At times we saw how hard it was – in the 90s it was common, if you remember, to complain about how grumpy The Queen looked; and no wonder, given what she endured in that decade. And yet, she was not sustained by whether people happened to *like* her, as perhaps many of us are, but by the simple knowledge that she was doing her duty.

In her later years we saw the natural joy that came from doing that duty - an inner, deeper joy than the kind we might be used to seeing on the faces of our celebrities and politicians, who have to fake it till they make it, as the rather hideous contemporary expression has it.

Now, looking back, we see and realise the sheer magnitude of the service which she has offered, to us, to our nation, and to God. Her service as Queen was obviously a very particular service; but her service as a Christian, living for others rather than for herself, is one for all of us.

Today in their anointing, Isla, Ilaria and Dimitri are set aside for that same way of life. We do not yet know what their lives will look like, just as Her Majesty's could not have been seen when she

was baptised on that day 96 years ago, though their personalities are no doubt already starting to shine through!

Will they have their own children? What will their relationships with others be like? Might they be nurses or doctors, or poets, or vets? Might they be social workers or bankers or artists? Public servants or physiotherapists? Will they decide to continue their lives within the church or not?

On one level of course it is pointless asking these questions at their tender age. But each of them is made in the image of God, and He knit them together in their mother's womb, as the psalm has it. Today, God sets aside each of them for his special purposes, whatever they may be.

In their baptism we believe they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit to equip them for those purposes, and for the whole of their earthly life.

And we pray them, as we welcome them into the People of God which is His Church. Amen