

Chosen and Anointed

The sermon given by Rev Sheila Cameron at the St Margaret's Sung Eucharist
on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, 7 May 2023

The readings were: Acts 7:55-60; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14



Jesus said to his disciples, "In my Father's house are many dwelling places ... I go to prepare a place for you." We have inherited a place of safety, salvation in God, through Jesus Christ. Last Sunday we read the story of Noah and the Flood, a narrative that the church has long identified with baptism. In that ancient story, the Ark was prepared by Noah, at God's command, as place of safety and, because we are baptised members of the body of Christ, we inherit the Church as our ark of salvation. Today, as we look forward to Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit, our readings celebrate the status of Christians as God's chosen people, divinely gifted, and celebrated in that rich variety of images in 1 Peter: we are not only "the stones that the builders rejected," but also "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."

You'd be forgiven for thinking there are just too many images here to get your head around. But Christians are *all* these things, because as followers of Jesus, we have been gifted with the Holy Spirit.

The journey begins with baptism, and that includes the gift of the Spirit, a sign of which in our Anglican tradition is the anointing of every new Christian with the oil of chrism. This echoes what we read in Scripture, that at his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus was "*anointed* with the Holy Spirit and with power" (as Acts 10:38 puts it), and we know that this was the source of his ability to work all kinds of miracles. As baptised Christians, too are anointed, gifted with a spiritual power to discern, to heal, to serve others and to change lives.

Anointing has a very special resonance for us this weekend. Anointing with holy oil has long been a symbol of the divine authority of kingship, beginning with the anointing of King Solomon by Zadok the Priest (1 Kings 1:39). Monarchs were appointed by God to reign over God's people on God's behalf, and our late Queen took this very seriously. Yesterday, in what for me was a most intensely moving part of the Coronation service, King Charles was anointed with oil consecrated in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, a church situated at the foot of the Mount of Olives where the oil originated and close to the place where Princess Alice, the King's grandmother and the mother of Prince Philip, is buried. The oil was similar in composition to the oil used in the consecration of the late Queen, we're told, perfumed with sesame, rose, jasmine, cinnamon, orange blossom and several other plant-based essences. Its origin in Jerusalem brought an element of inclusivity to the ceremony, as the city is holy for Christians, Jews and Muslims alike.





Yesterday's moment of anointing, or Act of Consecration, was veiled from the eyes of the public, hidden from the cameras, kept as a moment of deep personal encounter between the new sovereign and God.

Like our Lord Jesus Christ, King Charles was anointed "not to be served but to serve." The moment of anointing was similar to baptism, in the eyes of Christians a transformative moment of encounter and divine gifting. We read in Acts today of one particular life transformed by the gift of the Spirit, challenged in a way that was irresistible. The death of the first martyr, Stephen, is a shocking story, and yet the focus is not on the violence but rather on the radiance that shines from the face of Stephen. He was "filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55). Like Christ on the mountain, he was transfigured. He told those around him about his vision, and that act of witness sealed his fate. His death mirrors that of Jesus himself, pleading for forgiveness for his persecutors. Perhaps the speech he had just delivered to the Jews was a bit unwise, for he accused them of opposing the Holy Spirit and being blind to the work of God. That same passion for the gospel has brought the church through innumerable persecutions, for the message of salvation and the power of the Spirit continue to uphold us despite all opposition.

Our Gospel reminds us that, amid the turmoil of the world, the cruelty, the storms of persecution, the fearful accidents, the natural disasters, Jesus offers a place of safety. He speaks words of comfort: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." I find verse 2 of that chapter of John very comforting,

those words with which I began this sermon: "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places." Jesus recognizes the need of every individual for a spiritual home, a permanent place of security which is designed for them and them alone. "Many dwelling places" – a place for everyone, for people of all ages, races and cultures, whether living in families or living alone: "in my Father's house are many dwelling places." Within people of all faiths there is the same deep longing for God, for constancy, for assurance of love, forgiveness, personal worth, permanence. Jesus tells his disciples that he can provide all of that for them, and that he *will* provide it: if they recognize him as the one sent by the Father to show them the way.

Our new monarch has long recognised that he was destined to be king of a multi-cultural, multi-faith society. This week we have been reminded by commentators of his assertion back in the 1990s that instead of being known as "Defender of the Faith," a title dating from the time of Henry VIII, as King, Charles would wish rather to be known as the "Defender of Faith." Despite the uncompromisingly Christian character of yesterday's ceremony, including the King's oath to uphold the Protestant religion, that early desire resonates with our desire to find common ground with people of other faiths. In this capacity, our King is a figure-head for *all* who seek salvation, a place of safety in the presence of God.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus is *unique* in welcoming us and all people to an eternal place of safety. "I am the way, the truth and the life," he tells us. We believe that *his* way – that is, *the way of love* – is the only way to God the Father.





Throughout history, people have tried to find other ways to reach God: The legal route of obeying rules and regulations and strict moral codes; the route of self-discipline, meditation, mechanical repetitions and trance-inducing rituals: but Jesus's commandment to love is the only way to that personal God he calls "Father." His is the way of repentance and forgiveness, humility and compassion, but it's first of all the way of *faith*, of being open to that power we encounter in the words and person of Jesus, as revealed to us in the gospels. And faith itself is a *gift* of God: a sign of what we call the *grace* of God, by which we are first called to know him. The love of God comes in search of us; God does all the hard work for us and we respond in gratitude and faith.

Jesus tells his disciples that the truth they seek is to be found in *him*: "If you know me, you will know my Father also." He is the one who calls us, shapes us, builds us up, provides a home for us, anoints us with his Holy Spirit. He empowers us to do the same things he does by the Spirit that dwells in us. To him alone be the glory, now and for ever. Amen.

Our picture by Matea Gregg is made available on the Unsplash platform at <https://tinyurl.com/yeyvaa3w>