

Chrism Mass – April 2, 2012
Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament
Homily

Did you notice among the details of the Gospel reading that this is one of those “hometown” stories. It begins by telling us, “Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had grown up.”

It goes on to tell us something important that Jesus learned in that hometown experience while growing up, he became accustomed to going to the synagogue where he was one of the men who would get up to read from the Hebrew Scriptures.

I invite you to think for a moment your “hometown” experience;

- the place where you grew up
- the church you attended
- the experiences that you had in that “hometown” or neighborhood and at the church you attended while growing up
 - maybe you were an altar server
 - or sang in the choir
 - or you were a reader at Mass
 - whatever experiences you had that shaped your attitudes about God or about religion or about the most important values that you have even today

Maybe it’s been awhile since you thought about it, but do you have those images, experiences, thoughts in mind?

Stories about those experiences are important to us. We all had them. We can relate to other “hometown” stories because they tell us something without using technical or even fancy language.

I just happen to have one of those stories I would like to share with you. Its told by a young man who grew up in a place he is proud to call his hometown. His name is Douglas.

When Douglas was 16 years old, he was feeling sick for a few days and was running a low-grade fever. His Mom thought he had the flu; that’s what it felt like to Douglas.

When his symptoms didn't change after a week of missing school and just staying in bed, his mother became concerned enough to take him to the family doctor.

The doctor quickly arranged for Douglas to be admitted to the hospital and ordered lots of tests. It was quickly learned that Douglas did not have the flu. It was much worse. He had leukemia.

The doctors told him about his illness and how it would be treated. They said that for the next 2 or 3 years, he would have to undergo chemotherapy. They didn't sugarcoat the side effects. They told Douglas he would lose his hair and that there would be a lot more days when his body would feel worse than having the flu.

It was hard for Douglas to understand all this and how it would hurt his plans to make the basketball team that year. He worried about not seeing his friends; about getting behind in school; and other things. Needless to say, Douglas began to feel sad.

One of his aunts, who still thought of Douglas as a 6 year old boy, came to visit him and brought some little stuffed animal. He politely thanked her and put it off to the side. After she left, he noticed that there was a little card and as he reached for it he saw a second card.

The first card was from Aunt Agnes. It reminded him that his Mom would make him write a thank-you note. Then he opened the second card. This is what it said,

Douglas. I know this may seem weird because you don't know me. But I had to write this. Your Aunt Agnes stopped at the gift shop to buy a gift for you. She told me about you. Don't you hate it when adults talk about you with strangers?

She told me that you are sick with leukemia. I'm 24 years old now and I am going to college. I volunteer at the gift shop here in the hospital. When I was 16, I found out I had leukemia and spent a lot of time in this place. If you ever want to talk with someone who knows what it's like to go through this, you know, losing your hair, and feeling so sick, just call the gift shop and ask for Maggie.

P.S. – Besides the doctors and nurses who really know their stuff, two things got me through. My faith in God and a volunteer that was helping here when I was going through everything. Yeah, he had it too and he invited me to call the gift shop if I ever wanted to talk.

Douglas called the hospital gift shop and asked for Maggie. She came to visit Douglas and they would talk. When he was too sick to talk, Maggie would open up a book and read to him.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus stood up and read from the Prophet Isaiah where it is written that he was to

- bring glad tidings to the poor
- proclaim liberty to captives
- recovery of sight to the blind
- let the oppressed go free
- proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.

When he finished, Jesus said “today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.”

The passage that Jesus read in the synagogue is a pretty good summary of what is important to him, but they are more than just hometown values or ideas.

When he said that they are fulfilled in him, Jesus was also expressing how important it is to put those values into action.

A college student named Maggie knew how to do that. Just ask a teenager named Douglas. But what about ourselves? What does all of this mean for us?

I hope you won't mind if I offer a few thoughts on just two of the implications for us.

First, we are gathered here in this Cathedral because this is the time when we consecrate the Sacred Chrism and bless the Oil of the Sick and the Oil of Catechumens. They are the spiritual medicines that we use

- in the ordination of priests and bishops

- in the Confirmation of teenagers who are moving ahead in their faith formation and of persons of all ages who are newly arrived in coming to our Catholic family
- in the consecration of churches and altars
- in the pastoral care of the sick
- in the encouragement of those who are preparing to be baptized

The Sacred Chrism and the Holy Oils are gifts for us. They don't come from the gift shop. They are gifts from Jesus Christ and his Church.

Unlike a little stuffed animal that may not have been the most appropriate gift for a 16 year old boy that is graciously received but more or less set aside, the gifts of the Sacred Chrism and the Holy Oils that are consecrated and blessed today, are absolutely to be used, and not merely displayed.

During the season of Lent, I have had the opportunity to speak with a number of people who have received those gifts and deeply cherish them, or who look forward to receiving them. I have spoken with

- a woman who asked for the sacrament of the anointing of the sick. She told me later that even if she is not healed, it is enough for her to know that God is with her during time of illness
- a man who is preparing to join the Catholic Church at the Easter vigil. He told me that he can't wait to receive the anointing of the Holy Spirit when he receives the sacrament of Confirmation
- and I have spoken with young men who are discerning whether God is calling them to be ordained priests. They are already aware that the rite of ordination includes a special anointing, and they are aware that the ministry of a priest involves anointing others. One of those men told me that being able to anoint other people would be the closest thing to what Jesus did when he healed the sick, the lame, or the blind. He said, "Now that would be awesome!" I couldn't agree more.

That leads me to the second observation I would like to reflect on concerning the implications of Jesus reading from the Prophet Isaiah and telling us, "today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

In a special way

- bringing glad tidings to the poor
- proclaiming liberty to captives

- recovery of sight to the blind
- letting the oppressed go free
- proclaiming a year acceptable to the Lord

are works that are entrusted to the priests of the Church, especially in their preaching and in their celebration of the sacraments, including those in which the Sacred Chrism and Holy Oils are symbols of the sacred mysteries.

Whenever I hear the words of Jesus saying “today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” I think of another of his sayings, “I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but rather I have come to fulfill them.” Not to get rid of the important things, but to renew them.

We, the priests of the Church, come here today to renew the commitment to priestly life and ministry that we assumed at the time of our ordination.

We know and we believe that as priests of the Church, we are to act in *persona Christi*, in the person of Christ. That means others, especially the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed, and those lacking or seeking the truth, look to us to find the answers to their troubles.

Often we can find ourselves wondering “why me?” or “how can I present myself to others as “*persona Christi*” as the person of Christ?

The more that I read what has been published by our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, the more I am in awe at the depth of his intellect. I am also impressed by the conviction of his faith that leads him to make clear statements about the teachings of Christ and the Church.

But recently, I read a reflection written by Pope Benedict XVI about how he viewed himself and his vocation to the priesthood before he was ordained. These are his words:

“Since I was rather shy, and lacking in self-confidence, and downright impractical, since I had no talent for sports or administration or organization, I had to ask myself whether I would be able to relate to people

- whether, for example, as a chaplain I would be able to lead and inspire Catholic youth;
- whether, I would be capable of giving religious instruction to the little ones;

- whether I could get along with the old and the sick, and so forth. I had to ask myself whether I would be ready to do that my whole life long and whether it was really my vocation.”

Acknowledging his interest and talent as a student of theology, Pope Benedict goes on to say,

“It became clearer and clearer to me that there is more to the priestly vocation than enjoying theology; indeed, that work in the parish can often lead very far away from that and makes completely different demands. The “Yes” to the priesthood meant that I had to say “Yes” to the whole task, even in its simplest forms.”

If you pay careful to the writings and the teachings of Pope Benedict XVI; If you pay careful to the words of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Gospel today: you will recognize that the whole task of being a priest, even in its simplest forms is what really matters.

Certainly there are many serious and complex problems in our world today. But those serious and complex problems are not the most troubling. What really matters are the desire in every heart to be able to live and believe and be strengthened in the beliefs that we received in our home town experiences.

And even those hometown experiences are challenged and disrupted by experiences

- of being poor, whether spiritually or materially
- of being captive by sin; our own sinfulness or the sin of others
- of being blind, especially to the nearness of the face of Christ that is right in front of us; or blind to the truth because no one shares it
- of being oppressed by others who want to control and take advantage without any consideration for the fundamental, God-given dignity of every person.

Just ask the man who joyfully and tearfully explained to me how much he wants to be anointed at Confirmation so that he can be a better husband, father, and person.

Just ask a teenager like Douglas or a young adult like Maggie who recognized how fragile our own identity and sense of well-being can be, and

yet how near is the fulfillment of their deepest desires if only someone responds to them.

Just ask the people who show up at our doors and ask for food, or clothing, or shelter.

When Jesus stood up in the synagogue to read from the Prophet Isaiah and said, “today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing,” he understood what was at stake for the sake of God’s people. Jesus grew up with them in Nazareth. He saw and heard with his own eyes and ears. And Jesus knew that he was sent by God to tell us that God understands and cares.

For those of us priests who are responsible for providing that pastoral care for the people of God, today is a day for us to renew our commitment so that the words of Jesus are fulfilled in our hearing and our doing.

For everyone else here today, please pray for us, the priests of our Church, that we go forth from this celebration renewed in that commitment.

For those of us priests who are assembled here, please know the love of Christ and his people for you and the gratitude they have for the ways that you anoint them, through your preaching and through your putting into action the Gospel proclamation of Christ.

Finally, for all of us gathered here; we have so much to celebrate in this Chrism Mass; so much to be thankful for in this Holy Eucharist. I am especially thankful for all of you for your faithful witness to the Gospel of Christ. As imperfect as your response may be, do not be afraid to continue to do your part to carry on Jesus’ promise to fulfill the proclamation of Isaiah.

There are a lot people like Douglas or Maggie out there; go to them; speak to them; anoint them; and above all, share Christ with them.