

## A people fit for mission

In every generation and country, the Church has had to change in order to preach the Gospel effectively. The Church in Ireland and in the Diocese of Derry faces a new set of challenges if we are to bring the Gospel of mercy and forgiveness to the people of our time. Some 40 years ago, Pope John Paul II said that every generation is like a new continent to be conquered for Christ. We are called to be salt to the earth and light to the world in the circumstances of our time and place. The new continent to be conquered for Christ is at our doorstep.

Pope Francis has invited us all to see, not *our* way forward but, the *Lord's* way for us. He has proposed that we use a three-stage approach to becoming fit for mission in the Church of today, an approach which helps us in Derry. He proposes that we

- See
- Judge
- Act

### **A. See.**

Jesus said, 'The truth will set you free' (John 8:32). It is not always easy to accept things as they are. We may wish that circumstances were different, but maturity comes from seeing the truth, uncomfortable as it sometimes is. Otherwise, we remain trapped in an imaginary world of our own making.

We can all see that old ways of handing on faith are no longer working the way they did in the past. As faith communities we are failing to communicate the Gospel of Jesus effectively to very many of our contemporaries. That is particularly clear when it comes to making new young disciples of Jesus. In the past, the Irish helped to 'make disciples of all nations' through great and generous missionary work. Today the mission fields lie much nearer to home.

We live in a very pluralist and diverse society. People today have instant access to information and ideas from so many sources. Despite this, we are living with an epidemic of loneliness. Many people live in fear and despair. Forty thousand young people in NI are growing up in family that is affected by addiction to alcohol and drugs. It is clear that there is a huge need for good news in our society.

The Church lives in a public space and the former unquestioned authority of Church and church personnel has been damaged by those who abused power or sought to hide the truth.

What can we honestly say about the Church in our own diocese?

In the Derry Diocese we face the reality that a quarter of our priests will reach 75 over the next eight years. Eighteen priests are approaching retirement age and we can expect to have only a small number of ordinations. If we have 51 parishes and less than 50 priests, then clearly not every one of the current parishes can have a resident priest.

When we see the reality of a changing society and dropping clergy numbers, we have to restructure our ministries. Into the future, we have to be fit for purpose, if we are to bring the healing love of Jesus into so many dark corners. We have to see and acknowledge that reality. Wishing that things were different is not an option.

There are still many people of great faith who work tirelessly in parishes and clergy continue to work under huge pressure to serve the spiritual needs of parishioners.

### **B. Judge**

It would be easy to look at these realities and get lost in a sad story of decline and loss. However, we are asked to see the world with the compassionate and hope-filled eyes of faith.

I learned a lesson many years ago. The story we tell about the past has a big influence of how we see the future. If our narrative is concerned with all that has gone wrong, then we tend to expect the future to be bleak. If we can tell a story of God's grace at work in the past, we wait in joyful hope for more of the same.

The Bible is full of stories about people who had to look at the past through new eyes. After 40 years wandering in the desert, the Israelites looked back and saw those difficult years as a time when God formed them. The Apostles who, on Good Friday were in despair, could look back later and see that the Cross was a necessary moment of glory.

The Bible is full of stories of ordinary individuals who were asked to do extraordinary things in challenging circumstances, because they could trust in the wisdom of God's ways. Many of them were tempted to tell a tale of woe. But Moses, the prophets, Mary and the apostles were invited to believe in a God who was constantly faithful to his people.

Thus, we focus not on our resources but on the divine mission. We don't have to be in charge or to major in self-pity. We let God be Lord of the harvest. The One who

fed the large crowd with a few loaves and fishes can do great things when we think we are empty handed. When St Paul felt under pressure, he heard a word from God, "My grace is enough for you; my power is at its best in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9).

As people of Resurrection faith, we see reality but believe in a God who sees what we can become after a time of trial and purification. Like the Israelites on the way out of Egypt, we believe that the Promised Land is always ahead of us, never behind us.

Thus, the reality of the need to change is not a source of despair for us. We may rightly feel uncomfortable. However, the greatest enemy of Church lies not outside us but in our frightened hearts. Our pride may be hurt – but our story is one that remembers a God who sees His people through all sorts of challenges and difficult times. We are always being asked by God to 'put out into deep water' even when we think that we have worked hard and caught nothing (Luke 5:4-5).

For people of a biblical faith, today's realities are just one more place where God will show his strength, despite our weaknesses – or indeed because of our weakness.

### **C. Act**

So what decisions do we face?

We have chosen three themes for our Diocesan Pastoral Plan

- Building open and welcoming communities
- Growing in Faith together
- Making Jesus known and loved.

Putting these themes into practice does not just mean taking on more work. If we want to be fit for purpose into the future, we need to be church in a new way. We need to undergo a pastoral conversion. We have to ask the hard questions - and not be afraid of the answers we get.

Firstly, as a diocese we have known clearly defined parish boundaries. Each parish has been expected to do its job. But many of those parish churches were built in an era when no one had a car. The question is not 'how do we stretch our clergy further to provide the same services?' but 'how do discern God's mission to evangelise in 2019 and in the years ahead?' The system that was set up in the 1850s is not necessarily fit for purpose in the age of instant communication.

Structures exist, not to be served, but to serve the mission of bringing good news and mercy where they are most needed. If our present ways of being Church in each parish are not making disciples for Jesus, we need to review them. Parishes need to

consider how they go to outsiders and not on how they protect themselves and their comfort.

Secondly, if parishes are to work differently and in collaboration with neighbours, this big change needs a new heart. It involves formation of the lay faithful to become active missionaries in their own community. We already have great examples of that in the diocese.

All of this involves training so that local parish communities, under the leadership of their priest, have the necessary confidence and skills. It takes prayerful hearts to recognise the local pastoral needs and discern how the Lord is calling them to respond. It means giving priority and resources to building up parishioners in faith and not just to maintaining buildings. In the Church, it is the baptised People of God who are the living stones. (1 Peter 2:5)

### *Conclusion*

The most common phrase in the Bible is 'Do not be afraid'. We believe in Emmanuel, God-with-us. Speaking to a vast crowd of young people in Panama in January 2019, Pope Francis said, *"This is the now of God. It becomes present with Jesus: it has a face, it is flesh. It is a merciful love that does not wait for ideal or perfect situations to show itself."* We do not have to know the future. But we are called to do well whatever we do today.

I invite all our parish communities to pray, fast and give alms during Lent 2019. It is only through turning to the Lord that we will hear His voice. Our prayer is not that God will do our will – but that God's will might be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Mary said to the Angel Gabriel, *Let it be done to me according to your will.* We ask only that we might be attuned to God's call. It is only when we allow God to be Lord will the Kingdom of God grow in our midst.

Ash Wednesday 2019

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