**HOMILY FOR FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

**MAKING MISSIONARY DISCIPLES – PART II**

If you were at Mass last weekend and you heard Fr Damian or I preaching and/or your read the letter that I wrote to all parishioners, you may well have been asking yourselves: “*Where has all of this come from*”?

Before I answer that question, I’d like to ask you a question. When you think about your life of faith, your life in the Church, what is your holy discontent? Now, I mean your *holy discontent* not your grumbles, and moans and grips. When you think about your life of faith in the Church, what is it that saddens or frustrates you? I know that, for many of you, it’s the fact that family members – brothers, sisters, children, grandchildren, and, yes, perhaps good friends too – have stopped coming to church, no longer practice their faith and in some cases profess no longer to believe in God. I know this is a painful reality for many of you – because you have told me so.

So, having asked your holy discontent, I’m now going to tell you mine. Four years ago I was appointed as Parish Priest to these three parishes and asked to bring them into a clustered relationship. You know as well as I that it was a challenging experience for all of us. It’s hard for me to describe to you what it’s like being the Parish Priest of three separate parishes at the same time; trying to respond to the various demands, requests and needs that fly at me from all directions; trying to keep the ship afloat, all the balls in the air or whatever other analogy you might use. Keeping the ship afloat, keeping all those balls in the air requires a lot of maintenance! Now, I think I’m pretty good a maintenance – Masses are celebrated when they should be, the catechetical programmes go through their cycles, sacraments are celebrated and parish life goes on, by and large, very smoothly. No one could say nothing ever happens in these parishes!. But the problem is (and now I’m also speaking from 16 years of experience as a priest) I find myself asking more and more: why do so many families stop practicing the faith after receiving the sacraments? Why, despite all our efforts, is there so little fruit?

You know, the statistics in this field are very scary. For every one person who joins the Church, 10 will leave. 95% of young people confirmed will have left within three years. Sometimes people will say: “Ah, you shouldn’t worry too much about that, they’ll come back when they’re older, in their own good time”. Yes, maybe a few will, but you know as well as I that many more will not. Besides, the grace of the sacraments is not a slow-release capsule – it’s meant to affect and change our lives now, not at some undetermined date in the future. What are doing is sacramentalising people rather than evangelising them! It’s not life-giving, it’s not transformational, and it’s not changing people’s lives! This is the holy discontent that I’ve been living with for some years now in my experience of priesthood.

And then, in the spring of this year, I read this book: *Divine Renovation: Bringing your parish from maintenance to mission* by Fr James Mallon. Until recently, Fr Mallon was the Pastor of St Benedict’s parish, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. I read the book, I put it down for a couple of weeks and then I had to read it again. I have to tell you that, outside of the pages of Sacred Scripture, I have read nothing which has challenged and inspired me more than this book. Before he or I knew that he was coming here, Fr Damian had also read this book. But Fr Damian didn’t leave it there, he contacted Fr James in Canada and arranged to spend nearly a month this past summer living and working in this parish Fr James’ parish in Nova Scotia.

So, what’s the book about? Fr James says that the biggest crisis that we have in the Catholic Church today is an identity crisis. We’re trying to maintain a Catholic culture of 50 years ago, a culture that no longer exists, and as a result we’re managing a slow decline. We’ve become so wedded to our methods that we’ve forgotten our mission – that mission that Fr Damian and I spoke about last weekend: to make disciples.

So, what did Fr James do? Well, together with his parishioners, he set out to change the whole parish culture so that everything they do and are would be about making missionary disciples. And the result? Well, seven years down the road, that parish has been transformed. People are awake, alive in their faith, hungry for more, eager to be fed. And so, Fr James wrote this book to share this vision; to show that a maintenance model of Church, which sucks out all the life and joy, isn’t the only way! They don’t profess to be the finished article, but that parish has truly been transformed.

This October of this year, Fr James Mallon and his whole team came over from Canada to lead a two day conference at St Mary’s University, in Twickenham. Fr Damian and I, and a couple of parishioners, had the privilege of attending the conference. There were 300 delegates, 100 of them being priests. It was joyful, inspirational and hoped-filled. Listening to Fr James and his team share with us the experience of the renewal and transformation that has happened in his parish convinced me even more that it is possible here too!

So how did Fr James bring about this transformation? The principle tool that he has been using to bring about this renewal is Alpha. Now, Alpha is not new, it’s been used in the Catholic Church for over 20 years. Alpha is a gentle introduction to the Christian faith. The crucial thing about Alpha is that it allows you and me to become intentionally invitational: to invite people to “Come and see”. We will begin to use Alpha in the autumn of 2018 and I’ll be sharing more about how it works in the coming months. But, for now, it’s enough to say that Alpha is an important piece in the puzzle to make parishes of missionary disciples. Sometimes people ask me, “Fr Shaun, can we have a parish mission”? With Alpha lived as a culture rather than just being run as yet another parish programme, we can become parishes permanently on mission!

But hang-on a minute, I can hear you thinking, why should we listen to what this James Mallon has to say? Why his vision? Well, I suggest that we should listen to James Mallon because what he says in his book speaks very powerfully into what Pope Francis has to say to the Church in *Evangelii Gaudium* [The Joy of the Gospel]:

*I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them*” [EG3]

*I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and stru****c****tures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today’s world rather than for her self-perseveration*. {EG27}

These are very challenging words because, if we’re honest, you and I are very attached to our customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures. We’ve become addicted to maintaining the status-quo, and so we’re not doing what Jesus commands us to do: making disciples. Pope Francis sets the vision and Fr James Mallon shows us how to make the vision a reality by giving us a road-map of how, in very practical ways, we can become parishes of missionary disciples.

Today is the First Sunday of Advent. Jesus’ message to us in the gospel is very clear: **Stay Awake**! He says it four times! There are only four sentences in the gospel today and in each one Jesus tells us to stay awake! In the Church today we have largely fallen asleep – we’re in maintenance mode – we’re not doing the key thing that Jesus commanded us to do: we’re not making disciples.

We can’t go on this way! It’s deadly! It’s slowly strangling the Church. It’s not supposed to be like this and the good news is that it doesn’t have to be like this., That’s why we’re embarking on this journey from maintenance to mission.

And if you want to get an early glimpse into where we’ll be going, then I invite you to read *Divine Renovation*! Prepare to be challenged! But prepare also to be fired-up with a vision of what our parishes could be like in five years’ time, in ten years’ time. And when you’ve read it, let me know what you think about it! In February 2018 we will have some open meetings during which we want to hear your dreams, your thoughts about how our parishes might be renewed.

Things won’t change overnight. This is not a quick fix! We’re seeking to change a culture from one built around maintenance of the status quo to one which is consciously and deliberately focused on looking outwards, focused on mission, and that’s not the work of a moment.

It’s our calling to be missionary disciples. I, as your Parish Priest, together with Fr Damian, share Jesus’ dream, Pope Francis’ dream and, yes, Fr James Mallon’s dream that we truly become parishes of missionary disciples. We invite you to join us on this journey - at whatever pace is comfortable for you.

Brothers and sisters, let’s call on the Holy Spirit to help us to embrace our true identity as missionary disciples, so that we can share in God’s work – for ultimately it is *his* work – of Divine Renovation!