

HOMILY FOR THE 23RD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR – 10TH SEPTEMBER 2023

PREACHING SERIES – A PICTURE OF THE FUTURE

PART 1 – AN IDENTITY CRISIS

Tuesday of this past week marked the first anniversary of my arrival in Hampton Hill as your new Parish Priest. I don't know how you feel about that: it might be: "Has it *only* been a year? It seems like only yesterday!" Or it might be, "Oh! ... Has it only been a *year* ... it feels like an eternity!"

Either way, it's been a busy year. For me, this past year has been about getting to know you and you to get to know me; it's been about putting down some solid foundations and steadying the ship (with apologies for the mixed metaphors). Today, I'm beginning a three-Sunday preaching series called *A Picture of the Future* in which I'll be sharing my vision, my dream, for the future of our parish.

Now, you might be thinking, "Fr Shaun, what do you mean by 'Vision,' and why do you feel the need to share it with us? Why don't you just get on and do it?" Well, it's important that I share both the "what" and the "why" with you. A good definition of 'Vision' is 'A God-given picture of the future that produces hope and passion.' And I need to share my vision with you – because I want you to catch vision, to catch fire, as it were, so that this can become *our* vision.

Imagine you're travelling across a strange country by bus. You're at the bus stop, and a bus comes along with only a number and no destination shown. You'll probably not jump on that bus because you're unsure where it's going. I'm sharing my vision with you because I can't expect you to "get on board with it" if you don't know where we're going. So, today and for the next two Sundays, you could say I'm putting the sign on the bus.

In the spring of 2017, I read the book *Divine Renovation: Bringing your parish from maintenance to mission* by Fr James Mallon. Fr James, a Parish Priest in Canada, was then the Pastor of St. Benedict's parish in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Reading this book has transformed how I understand the mission of the Church and how I understand my priesthood. I can tell you, with all honesty, that outside the pages of Sacred Scripture, nothing has challenged and inspired me more than the contents of this book.

So, what's it about? Fr. James says that among the many crises the Catholic Church faces today, the biggest is an *identity crisis*. Today, we're living in a post-Christendom world – in other words – we're living in a world here in the West where the underlying culture of our society no longer supports the day-to-day living of the Christian life. If you doubt that, just look at the results of the 2021 UK Census, which showed that – for the first time since the census was first taken

in 1801, less than 50% of the UK's population (46.2% to be precise) identified themselves as Christian – a 13% drop since the previous census just a decade before. The next biggest self-identification after Christianity was "No Religion," up 12% from 25.2% in 2011 to 37.2% in 2021.

Brothers and sisters, we're trying to maintain a Christian culture that, to all intents and purposes, largely no longer exists. As a result, we're faced with the reality of managing decline. Our parishes are designed to reach a world – a culture – that no longer exists – and we wonder why our methods aren't bearing much fruit!

Fr. James argues that we've become so wedded to our methods (to that culture that no longer exists) that we've forgotten our core mission. What Mission? Well, this is the central theme of Fr. James' book. He quotes the Great Commission Jesus gave to his Apostles immediately before his Ascension.

Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. (Matthew 28:19)

These were Jesus's final words on earth to his Apostles! There are four verbs in that sentence: *Go, make, baptise, and teach*, but one of them is the grammatical hinge – the principal or finite verb upon which the whole sentence depends. I wonder which verb you think that might be: *go, make, baptise, or teach*? The finite verb in this sentence is *make*, and it's in the imperative form – essentially making it a command. In the Greek original, it's the word *matheteusate* – which literally means 'make disciples' – as we don't have one word in English to express that; we have to use two. So, the going, the baptising, and the teaching are all secondary – they all depend upon the finite verb: 'make disciples'.

Fr James argues that the Catholic Church has largely forgotten this truth about itself: that our *purpose* as a Church is to 'make disciples'. The Church has a long tradition of taking the Gospel to the ends of the world – we're great at baptising and teaching; the Catholic Church has a wonderful tradition of catechesis. But we're not good at helping people to have a personal encounter with Jesus Christ – we're not good at making disciples.

What did Fr. James do at St Benedict's to tackle this identity crisis? Well, that's the story of the rest of his book. With his parishioners, he began to change the whole culture of his parish so that everything they did was focused on making disciples. And the result? Nearly 13 years later, that parish, St Benedict's in Halifax, has been transformed. And Fr. James is now doing the same thing in another parish in Nova Scotia. So impactful has this book been that it's given rise

to The Divine Renovation Ministry, inspiring and equipping Catholic parishes worldwide to become communities focused on making disciples.

Before my Sabbatical, during the final four years of my time as Parish Priest of three parishes in Hertfordshire, we embarked on the journey of moving from being focused on maintenance to being focused on mission, following the principles of Divine Renovation. During those years, I witnessed some wonderful fruit in the form of changed lives – of parishioners full of joy, surrendering their lives to Jesus, coming alive in their faith, and wanting to share their faith with others. It wasn't an easy journey nor a quick fix, but it was exciting, transformative, life-giving, and joyful.

"But hang on a minute," you might be thinking, "why should we take any notice of what this Fr James is doing in far-off Canada? Why should we be interested in what he has to say?" I believe what Fr. James says is worth listening to because he powerfully echoes what Pope Francis says in his Apostolic Exhortation: *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*). Pope Francis wrote:

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 structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today's world rather than for her self-preservation. (*Evangelii Gaudium* 27)

These are challenging words because, honestly, you and I are very attached to our customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language, and structures. We've become addicted to our self-preservation - to maintaining the status quo. Why? Not least because we find change, or even the idea of change, difficult. Fr. James tells the story of a conversation with one of his parishioners, who was adamantly opposed to the changes he was making to help the parish become more mission-focused. He explained that unless the Church changes, it will continue in terminal decline. The parishioner responded, "I don't care if the Church dies, just as long as it outlives me!". Is that where we are, brothers and sisters? Are we so attached to our customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language, and structures that we'd prefer to see the Church die rather than embrace change? I hope not!

What's the consequence of not being prepared to change? It's stagnation, it's slow decline. Now, I'm not saying that change is easy – it's not. Change requires sacrifice from us all, leaving behind what's familiar and comfortable. Here's the thing ... we're so rooted in a culture that perhaps worked 60 years ago but which is driving decline in the Church today that major change is necessary if we're going to become a missional parish, placing making disciples at the heart of everything we do.

Jesus commands us to 'make disciples,' Pope Francis shares a dream of what a mission-focused Church can look like, and Fr. James gives us a practical roadmap of how it's possible to become a parish focused on making disciples. Next weekend, in the second homily of this preaching series, I'll share with you how I want us to begin prioritising making disciples through giving primacy of place in everything we do to evangelisation.

But for today, I want to invite you to do something. If what I've shared today has struck a chord with you, I encourage you to read Fr James's book. We have a few copies we can loan out to parishioners, or you might choose to buy your own copy. Not everyone's going to want or be able to read the book – so beginning in late September, we're going to have a series of meetings - we're calling them 'Divine Renovation Conversations' – both on Zoom and in person so that over four weeks, we can explore together the key themes of the Divine Renovation renewal process. So, I encourage you to read the book or sign up for these conversations or both!

This Sunday, the refrain of our Responsorial Psalm is *O that today, you would listen to his voice, harden not your hearts*. When faced with the reality of change, we can quickly harden our hearts because we find change difficult, and to be frank, we're often quite content as we are; we don't want to change. I invite you today to open your heart to this vision I share with you. I encourage you to listen, not to my voice, not to Fr James' voice, not even to Pope Francis's voice – but to listen to the voice of Jesus himself, who in the Great Commission commands us: "Go, therefore, and make disciples."

And the same Jesus says in today's Gospel: "*When two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them.*" What would our parish look like, if not two or three, but our whole community here at St Francis's were to embrace this vision of a parish, a Church, that's outward-looking, that's joyful, that's Mission-focused, that's actively and intentionally seeking in everything it does to make disciples! Now, that for me, and I pray for you, too, is a God-given picture of the future that produces hope and passion!