

HOMILY FOR THE 25th SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

24TH SEPTEMBER 2023

PREACHING SERIES - A VISION OF THE FUTURE

Like every Catholic priest, I spent several years in formation at seminary before I was ordained. I studied philosophy, theology, scripture and liturgy, Canon Law, Spirituality, and much more, but do you know the one thing I wasn't taught? How to lead! It's ironic because the most important role of the Parish Priest or Pastor is to lead his flock.

Many of you in your professional careers have undertaken training in how to lead – but priests? No. If we were lucky, as I was, in the early years after ordination, we got to work with good Parish Priests who were also good leaders.

This is the third and final homily in my Preaching Series: *A Picture of the Future*. Two Sundays ago, I spoke about the Catholic Church today having an identity crisis – that we've forgotten that Jesus, in his Great Commission, told his followers to "Go ... and make disciples". For decades, we haven't been making disciples, and as a result, the Church is in rapid decline. I spoke about the book *Divine Renovation: Bringing your parish from maintenance to mission* by Fr James Mallon, who names this identity crisis and, from his own experience in Nova Scotia, Canada, offers a vision of a parish that intentionally puts making faith-filled disciples at the forefront of everything it is and does.

Last Sunday, I shared how we'll use *Alpha* as our principal evangelisation tool – just as many Catholic parishes worldwide inspired by the Divine Renovation model of parish renewal are already doing. *Alpha* helps people with no faith or lapsed faith to ask the big questions of life and faith in a friendly environment where no question is off the table. *Alpha* will also help us in two important ways: Firstly, *Alpha* will help us to become great at evangelising by enabling us, simply and comfortably, to invite our family members, friends, and colleagues to come and experience *Alpha*, and secondly, as parishioners experience *Alpha* themselves (as I hope many of you will) it can energise and renew us in our faith journey as we explore afresh what is at the core of our Christian faith and what it means to live as a Christian in our world today.

Making all of this a reality in our parish will obviously involve a lot of work, which will mean embracing a new leadership model in the parish– and that has to start with me! In the Parable of the Vineyard Tenants, which Jesus tells in today's Gospel, we hear how the landowner seeks out workers and personally engages with them. This highlights what's at the heart of servant leadership: leaders who prioritise serving and supporting their team above their own interests. Humble leaders constantly seek to inspire trust, build strong relationships, and create a cohesive and motivated team. The parable challenges everyone in leadership roles in the Church to seek to be servant-leaders who uplift and equip others, appreciate their efforts, and foster a culture where we work together and are accountable to each other. These are the leadership principles I want to foster in leading the renewal of our parish as we seek to create a vineyard of fruitful, mission-focused disciples.

Today, I want you to know that I must change my leadership style for this vision of a renewed parish to become a reality. There's no such thing as a well-balanced leader, but there is such a thing as a well-balanced team, where each team member brings a different skill set and actively and intentionally works with the others in the team to make the best decisions possible - and that's what's needed if real and lasting renewal is going to happen.

So today, I'm announcing that I've formed an interim Senior Leadership Team or SLT. Interim because it's important to see if we can work well together before setting things in stone. Many of

you will be used to SLTs in the workspace, especially if you work in schools, where SLTs are the norm. It's not normal in the Church, not yet anyway. I formed an SLT in my previous appointment in Hertfordshire; it was one of the best decisions I ever made!

This isn't leadership by committee; as Parish Priest, I'm still the leader, but I'm intentionally choosing to lead out of a team and share my responsibility for leadership with others – so that together we can make the best decisions for the parish. The SLT won't be focused on the day-to-day management of the parish; instead, we will focus on how we make this vision I've been sharing a reality in our parish.

I'm sure you're all eager to know who I've chosen for my SLT. The interim SLT will consist of myself, Peter Stuart, Irena Obsanzska, Lizzet Belcher, and Amy Kinmond. Many of you will know Peter and Irena, who have been in the parish for a long time. Lizzet has been a parishioner for a few years, and Amy is relatively new to our community. I've chosen these four people because I've seen in each of them the same passion for a renewed and mission-focused parish that so inspires me.

I've asked a lot of you during this preaching series, but I hope you've been able to grasp the key points: that we have an identity crisis because we've forgotten that Jesus calls us to be and make missionary disciples, that giving priority to evangelisation through *Alpha* will help us to reach out to those beyond our parish as well as helping *us* to grow in faith too; and that to make this vision a reality we have to embrace a new style of leadership.

Bill Gates, the Founder of Microsoft once said: Most people overestimate what they can do in one year and underestimate what they can do in ten years. I want to amend that and say to you today – Let's not overestimate what we can achieve in one year, but let's not overestimate what we can achieve in three.

I know that ALL of this is a lot for you to take in and that's why I really want to encourage you, if you haven't already done so, to sign up for our *Divine Renovation Conversations*, which begin on Monday. In these conversations, we'll watch some short videos that explain the key themes of this parish renewal process. We'll also watch some powerful testimonies from priests and laypeople from the UK and elsewhere about how embracing the model of Divine Renovation renewal has blessed their lives as parishes and individuals. And there will be time for us to share our thoughts with each other and to ask questions.

You **don't** need to read the *Divine Renovation* book to come along to these conversations. These sessions will really help you to get a better understanding of *why* I am so passionate about this vision I've been sharing with you and the impact for *good* that it can have on the life of our parish. And if you *can't* attend all four sessions – that doesn't matter – just come along to the ones you can – so I really, really encourage you to sign up for these conversations.

One final thing – one which I hope and pray will touch your heart and help you understand why I believe it's so important that we become a mission-focused parish. I want to leave you with this question: *Who in your life would you love to be here in church with you right now but isn't here?* As you think about that person, open your heart to what our parish might look like if we intentionally embrace this vision of parish renewal. How many people might we help to come to or return to faith? And what might becoming a parish of missionary disciples do for *us* and our faith journey – as individuals and as a parish? It has the potential to invigorate and energise us in the joyful living out of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Isn't that something to get excited about? It's that something to fill us with hope and passion?
With all my heart, I think so! I hope ... and pray that you do too.