

HOMILY FOR THE 24th SUNDAY OF THE YEAR – 17th SEPTEMBER 2023

PREACHING SERIES – A PICTURE OF THE FUTURE

Have you ever found yourself in an unexpected conversation with someone and felt lost for the right words, but at some point, *after* the conversation, the *thing* you really wanted to say suddenly came to your mind? I had an experience like that this summer. The presbytery doorbell went early one evening, and I answered the door to find two very smartly dressed men standing there. One of them asked an unusual question that made me a bit wary, so I asked him, "*In what context are you asking me this?*". He said, "*We're Jehovah's Witnesses.*" I don't know whether you've had many encounters with JWs, but in my experience, they're not really *about* having an open and constructive discussion or genuinely listening to the views of others – so at this point, I just said, "*Well, I'm a Catholic priest, so I don't think this conversation is likely to go anywhere helpful for either of us.*" To which he replied, somewhat patronizingly: "*I'm sorry that you feel that way ... because, etc., etc.*" At this point, I decided it was time to end the conversation, so I politely wished them a lovely evening and closed the door.

A little later, it occurred to me that they'd intentionally come to a house with the word "*Presbytery*" on the door – a house attached to a great big Catholic Church, with the sign "*Catholic Church*" literally emblazoned on it – and although, when I opened the door, I mightn't have looked much like a priest (I was in shorts and T-shirt) – there would be some likelihood that anyone opening the door in an evening would be a priest! And so, I thought to myself, what I *should* have said was: "*We may believe different things, but you've come to a priest's house in the hope of converting me – do you think that's the most respectful way for one person of faith to behave towards another?*" Of course, those words didn't come to me at the moment – and they probably wouldn't have made much difference, but it shows how we sometimes struggle to find the *right* words for the *right* moment.

I'm sure you've had experiences where you've struggled to find the right words, perhaps in a tense situation in the workplace or in a difficult conversation with a friend or family member. Maybe you've struggled to find the right words when talking about your faith. If the topic of religion or faith comes up, the first reaction of many Catholics is to try to steer the conversation onto another subject as quickly as possible. There might be many reasons for that – but one reason is that we often lack the confidence to talk about God and faith.

This is Week Two in my Preaching series – *A Picture of the Future*. Last Sunday, I talked about how reading the book *Divine Renovation* by Fr. James Mallon has transformed my understanding of the mission of the Church and of my priesthood. The central argument of Fr James' book is that the Catholic Church today has an identity crisis, that we've forgotten *who and what* we're called to be. He refers to Jesus' Great Commission – his last words on earth: "*Go, therefore, and make disciples*" and argues we've forgotten as a Church that *before everything else*, we're called to be

and make missionary disciples: *disciples*: those who seek to follow Jesus by living in a personal relationship with him, and *missionary*: those who intentionally seek to share the Good News of Jesus with others. Fr James argues that we've become a Church almost totally focused on maintenance, with little or no attention paid to the truth that, in its very essence – the Church is called to be Missional!

Now, maintenance in itself isn't a bad thing. Maintenance, at its best, is about caring for the flock of the Church – and that's important: Jesus says to Peter in John Chapter 21: "*Feed my lambs ... Look after my sheep ... Feed my sheep.*" But the Great Commission shows us that it's not meant to be the main thing we do. Jesus didn't say: "*Go, therefore, and maintain the flock.*" He said, "*Go, therefore, and make disciples.*" And if we remain a Church primarily focused on maintaining the flock – which is what we (and most Catholic parishes) have been doing for decades, then the flock we're maintaining will keep shrinking ... until there's no flock to maintain. What we've been doing as a Church for decades isn't working. How do we know that? Because it isn't bearing much fruit! Albert Einstein famously once said that the definition of insanity is "*doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results.*" If, as a Church, we keep doing what we've always done, the way we've always done it ... well, neither can we expect to get different results.

My vision, my dream, is that we become a parish that *intentionally* chooses to put *making missionary disciples* ahead of *everything* else we do – that evangelisation becomes the first and highest priority in all our parish activity. Evangelisation can be a scary word for many Catholics – we either associate it with the Pentecostal Churches or, at best, see it as what "special" Catholic missionaries do in far-off lands.

Today, I want you to know that evangelisation doesn't have to be the scary prospect it probably feels to you. The principal tool for evangelisation that we will use here at St Francis is something called *Alpha*. *Alpha* began in the Church of England but is being used very successfully in many Catholic Churches worldwide. Some of you will have heard of *Alpha*, and others may have experienced it – several Catholic parishes in this area have or are using it. *Alpha* isn't just another programme that we try for a while and then move on to something else. *Alpha* will be something embedded & permanent at the heart of all our parish activity.

What happens at *Alpha*? Over the course of 11 weeks, *Alpha* gives a gentle introduction to the Christian faith – asking questions like, *Is there more to life than this? Who is Jesus? Who is the Holy Spirit?* *Alpha* allows people with little or no faith to ask the big questions of life and faith – in a friendly and non-judgemental environment where no question is off the table. *Alpha* takes place within the context of a shared informal meal, some input via an inspiring video presentation, followed by discussion in small table groups.

The amazing thing that *Alpha* can do for you and me is help us to become evangelisers by enabling us to become *intentionally invitational*. What do I mean by that? There's a moment early in John's Gospel where John the Baptist points out

Jesus to two of his disciples and says: "There is the Lamb of God". The two would-be disciples (one of whom is Andrew) pluck up the courage to speak to Jesus, and they rather shyly ask, "*Where do you live*"? To which Jesus offers the gentle invitation, "*Come and see*." We too can offer that gentle invitation "*Come and see*" to our relatives, friends, and colleagues as we invite them to come try *Alpha* in our parish. We can say to them: "*Come and see. If you enjoy it, stay. If it's not for you, no one will come chasing after you*". That's it! That's all we have to do to become evangelisers. And we're not responsible for whether someone says yes or no – all we have to do is make the invitation. The rest we leave to God.

But "*Does it work?*". Six years ago, I stood in the three parishes I was then parish priest of and shared the vision I now share with you. I talked about our intention to launch *Alpha*. A few days later, someone mentioned that two sisters – Maria and Tracey – were very excited about the vision and eager to try *Alpha*. As these two sisters were described, I realised I had no idea who they were. Like so many Catholics, they were doing their best to come to Mass regularly, but they weren't involved in any other way in the life of the parish.

Well, Maria and Tracey both took part in our pilot *Alpha* and through it, they both had an experience of the Holy Spirit, which, if they were here today, they would tell you changed their lives forever. Maria and Tracey opened their hearts to a personal relationship with Jesus, and they became key leaders in the parish – leading and coordinating *Alpha*, leading Prayer Ministry, and becoming genuinely engaged with the life of the parish. So impactful was *Alpha* on Maria's life that at a *Divine Renovation* Conference in Birmingham in 2019, in front of Fr James, several bishops, dozens of clergy, and hundreds of lay people from all over the world, she stood on a stage and in beautiful words, which brought many of us there to tears, shared how at *Alpha* she'd had an experience of the Holy Spirit and an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ, that had changed and blessed her life.

"*Is all this necessary, Fr. Shaun? Isn't our parish OK as it is?* I believe it is necessary with all my heart, and I want to show you why. Would you please put your hand up if there's someone in your family: a child, a brother, a sister, a parent, or maybe a dear friend – who's fallen away from the practice of the faith? Please put your hand up if that's true for someone in your family. Now, keeping your hand up, would you please look around the church. Pretty much every family here is living with this reality!

Last weekend, I shared some census statistics which showed that the Church is in decline, but here's the thing ... what just happened shows that this is *personal* – it's not just about numbers on a page – it's about real people, it's about the people *you* love. During this coming week, I invite you to think about that person or those people who came into your mind just now and imagine a future where, as a parish, we could play a part in bringing them, and people like them, to faith or *back* to faith.

Becoming a parish that prioritises evangelisation before everything else will mean that we have to embrace change, and change is scary and unsettling. It will also be hard work. It will mean we have to develop a new style and experience of leadership in our parish – and that's the part of my vision I'll be sharing with you next weekend in the final homily of this preaching series.

St. Paul, writing to the Romans (2nd Reading), says: *The Life and death of each of us has its influence on others – if we live, for we live for the Lord, if we die, we die for the Lord, so that alive or dead we belong to the Lord*". We're called to be ambassadors for the Lord, to whom we belong. And our words *will* have an influence on others – and those words don't have to be a long eloquent sermon – they don't involve standing on a soap box with a megaphone, and they certainly don't involve knocking on the doors of strangers! Our act of evangelisation can be as simple as asking someone we know, "Would you like to come and try Alpha?" Jesus's invitation to the would-be disciples was a gentle and non-threatening: "Come and see," and it can be as simple as that for us, too.

What would our parish look like if we could focus, before all else, on looking for men and women who are searching for God? It's my hope and prayer – and I hope it can become yours too – that we, here at St Francis de Sales, can become a community whose fundamental orientation is outward and mission-focused. Let's embrace the mission that Jesus Christ has given us, to *be and make Missionary Disciples*, trusting always in the power of the Holy Spirit, who makes all things possible.