

HOMILY FOR 30TH SUNDAY - YEAR A
FR SHAUN'S PREACHING SERIES: THE SUNDAY EXPERIENCE - WEEK TWO

Are you an extrovert or an introvert? Despite standing up here in front of you all every Sunday, at heart, I'm an introvert. One of the things I really struggle with is walking into a room of complete strangers. It makes me very uncomfortable, & my natural reaction in such a situation is to go & stand in a corner & hope that nobody notices me!

This is Week Two of my preaching series - *The Sunday Experience*. I spoke last weekend about how, as we think about parish renewal, we need to invest time & energy into working on the quality of the Sunday experience of Mass. How *accessible* is it? How *engaging* is it? How *joyful* is it?

During this preaching series, I am exploring what Fr James Mallon, in his book *Divine Renovation* calls the Three Hs: *Hymns, Hospitality, & Homilies*. Last Sunday, I spoke about the importance of hymn-singing & Church music generally to the quality of our Sunday Experience. I explained how at the 6pm Mass, we'll now sing hymns; how at the 9 am Mass, we're looking to boost the numbers singing in the choir & at ways the choir can help to bolster the congregational singing of hymns, & how at the 11 am Mass - from Advent the singing will be lead from the front of the church that at that Mass we will be introducing contemporary Praise & Worship songs.

I also spoke about my desire to install LED screens on either side of the church, on which we can display hymn lyrics & the prayers of the Mass, & how this can open up a new ministry of service for our teenagers.

This weekend, I'm tackling the second **H - Hospitality**. When we think about the ministry of hospitality in a parish, I think that most of us automatically think about the ministry of the Welcomers at the door. What I want you to know today is that if we're going to make our Sunday Mass experience accessible to everyone, we have to realise that *ALL of us* have a responsibility for hospitality - not just the Welcomers.

I began by speaking about how I find it very hard to walk into a room of strangers. I wonder how many visitors or newcomers arrive in our church &, once they're through the Welcoming Area, no one else speaks to them? How many leave the church without having spoken to any parishioner other than the one who handed them the Newsletter as they entered? How welcome or unwelcome might they feel when nobody says hello - how might they feel when someone looks grumpily at them because they're sitting in what that person deems to be *their* place or when someone refuses to move along the row to make room for the newcomer & instead forces the newcomer to scramble awkwardly past them? How many families with young children are given an unfriendly glare when their little ones are a bit restless & making some noise? All of these things happen in churches - & they speak to the

extent to which we **are** or are **not** a community that is seeking to offer intentional, meaningful, hospitality.

And you know, this isn't just about visitors & newcomers. One of the things that came out of our recent *Divine Renovation Conversations* is that many parishioners feel that we're largely an anonymous group of people. We don't know each other; we don't know each other's names. What kind of community is that? Is it a community at all?

At the beginning of Mass today, I introduced what's going to become a local weekly tradition here: **Prayer Partners**. Where we - at the beginning of Mass - exchange names with someone near us (ideally someone whose name we don't yet know) & then agree to pray for each other throughout the Mass. When I first said the words *Prayer Partners* - you probably looked at me with sheer horror on your faces - but when it came to it I'd had a real job getting your attention back! You embraced it a beautiful way!

Next weekend, we're going to introduce a new monthly tradition - it's called **Name Tag Sunday** - on the first Sunday of each month, everyone will be invited to write their name on a sticky label when they come into church & wear it. *Prayer Partners* & *Name Tag Sunday* are - in themselves - two small things - but as we begin this journey of parish renewal, they're powerful symbols of our desire to be a Church where people are known by name! My hope is that, as well as praying for our prayer partners during Mass, we might actually have a conversation with them after Mass, maybe even over a cuppa in the hall.

The Gospel today contains Jesus' teaching about the greatest commandments - that we love God with our whole being & our neighbour as ourselves. This teaching, I believe, can be applied to the context of hospitality within our parish community. Applying Jesus' teaching to hospitality in the parish means creating an environment where all members, as well as visitors, are treated with love, kindness, & respect. It's about reaching out to the stranger, welcoming newcomers, & caring for the well-being of the church community.

Jesus' teaching in the Gospel today encourages a love for God & for our brothers & sisters here with us, especially those who are new & maybe feeling a little uncertain, or unwelcomed, or just **unnoticed**.

You know, Mass isn't the most newcomer-friendly experience for someone who's never been to Mass before or who's not been for a long time. In that sense, too, it can be a very unwelcoming place. Again, this is where screens can have a very positive impact on the Sunday Experience - making the prayers of the Mass (as well as the hymns) easily accessible to everyone. If we want to reach-out to the people of the 21st Century it ways that will engage them, then we have to embrace the ways in which 21st century technology can help us in that mission. As I mentioned last Sunday, I can't tell you yet *when* we might get the screens; - to do this properly involves

careful planning & we'll need a fundraising campaign for this specific purpose before we can introduce them.

William Temple, who was Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1940's, once said: *The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members* - I hope the late Archbishop won't mind me adapting his quote slightly saying: *those who are not YET its members*. This is a principle that we have to lean into as we embrace renewal - we'll do that principally through *Alpha* which will become our tool for evangelisation - but we also need to do it through the Sunday Experience. The end goal of great & intentional hospitality is that people coming to "check us out" feel *so welcomed* that they **want** to stay - that they want to *come back!*

Imagine for moment those occasions when I feel so uncomfortable that I want to go & hide in a corner & hope that nobody notices me ... *what if* someone **did** notice me & intentionally came over & spoke to me & welcomed me & maybe brought me into a conversation with another group of people? I would quickly feel comfortable, more at ease & genuinely welcomed, valued & appreciated. That same principle can be applied to the kind of hospitality we try to foster here in church.

Hopefully, today many of you have as your Prayer Partner someone whose name you never knew before, & next Sunday, hopefully, there'll be another person whose name you don't yet know but will - & next weekend - on *Name-Tag Sunday* - it'll be even easier for you to remember their name - because they'll be wearing it!

God knows us individually, he knows us personally, by name! Isn't that how we should be seeking to know each other, too? What could our parish look like if many more of us knew the names of many more parishioners - not just the names of our friends - but the names of many people who worship with us Sunday by Sunday? Wouldn't it be wonderful if, rather being a group of anonymous Christians who turn up for Mass & disappear out of the church with hardly a word exchanged with anyone outside of our families or long-time acquaintances - that as a community we were **growing** in knowing & being known to each other by name.

Part the challenge of this renewal process on which we've embarked is to cultivate the **heart of hospitality** within our parish community. Let's strive to become a community **known** for its love, made tangible through its hospitality. Let's embrace radical & intentional hospitality as a powerful expression of our love for God & our love for one another.