



Parish Forum Sunday 5th November 2023

At the beginning of my ministry here it seemed a good time to hold an open parish meeting, with the aim of repeating these once a term. My intention was to deepen a sense of shared responsibility for our parish, as well as an atmosphere of open collaboration and communication. A second meeting was held in the spring, and although I never got round to arranging a summer term meeting (*mea culpa*) nevertheless the area Masses included an opportunity for free-ranging conversation. I do also hope that you know you are able to approach me at any time to raise matters of concern or make suggestions.

Last Sunday we held the third such meeting, with a different focus: a follow-on from the parish mission week held just a month before. There is always a danger that a mission week can be wonderful, but then quickly forgotten. To help us move forward we were joined by Teresa Carvalho from the Sion Community, who led the mission team, along with Rose (also from Sion) with whom we may be working in the future – Sion are keen that Parish Missions should be in the context of an ongoing relationship (as am I).

We began of course with prayer invoking the Holy Spirit, then Teresa offered a few reflections to begin the conversation. Taking last week's gospel as the starting point she shared an image from the homily in her parish. If we imagine our life as a set of weighing scales, how is God weighted in our lives, and are there other things that might weigh more? Secondly, having seen someone carrying a paper bag with a message 'creating joy' on the side, what message would we have on the side of our bag. Thirdly, if we imagine ourselves setting up a satnav, what is our destination?

How is God 'weighed' in our lives?

It was acknowledged that we are not 'there' yet, in terms of making God the focus of everything but any acts of prayer e.g. at the beginning and end of the day are of value. A related question is to consider how much time we dedicate to God rather than other things. However, time dedicated to God takes many forms – acts of service as well as worship. One person felt that we should emphasise looking for God in other people rather than God as a remote object of worship: better to spend an hour being a Christian to other people than kneeling before the monstrance. Part of the richness of our faith is that we can say 'both...and' rather than 'either...or'. Another person's perspective was that just as the church includes religious orders dedicated to contemplative prayer and others dedicated to apostolic work and needs both, so each of us may be drawn to different activities and styles. Anything authentically Christian should be able to find an expression within the life of the church.

What message would be on the side of our bag?

Someone suggested a question that can challenge us, rather than statement; someone else followed up with the suggestion "Love is...?"

A number of contributions focused on the theme of **welcome**. It was acknowledged that welcome is something that involves all of us, not just the official welcome team. Everyone should be welcomed, whatever their circumstances. We might not be aware if someone is vulnerable for some reason, or has plucked up the courage to come after years. Welcome includes, for instance, trying to help those such as the homeless gentleman who turned up at the end of a mission event, and was given food and clothes and put in touch with local services.

We need to acknowledge, however, that different people have different experiences and also different wishes. Some spoke of feeling made very welcome by the parish, others had experienced the opposite. One person suggested we should begin Mass with an ordinary greeting rather than saving the welcome to the notices. *(My response, which I didn't want to interject with at the time, is that the liturgical greeting at the beginning of Mass is meant to bring us together specifically as a worshipping community; nevertheless it could be that I – or someone else – welcomes people before we begin Mass, as sometimes happens already when the psalm is introduced or an announcement made; however some people might not have arrived by this point).* Teresa Carvalho described her experience of a Covid overflow Mass in the school hall adjacent to her parish, where a lay person welcomed people and read the notices; it doesn't always have to be the priest who welcomes people.

A couple of people spoke movingly about their feeling of isolation; how easy it is for someone to be overlooked or ignored and not spoken to on their way in or out of Mass. This can be particularly hard when experiencing bereavement, or when new. Even though it may be unintentional, we all need to be sensitive and be aware of the effect of a simple greeting, whilst being respectful if someone does want to keep themselves to themselves. A couple of different views were expressed regarding the sign of peace during Mass. One person used to cry at this point as it was the only time anyone looked at her. Another felt this was a missed opportunity and we could use it to greet people properly and introduced ourselves by name. Someone else felt that this was not the right time for that and especially with a hearing impairment already finds the sign of peace quite difficult.

One person remarked on how good it was that we have coffee between Sunday morning Masses as a chance to meet people and build community, so that parish life continues after Mass ends.

There were a few comments surrounding the welcome we show to **families** with young children. We often speak of mums but should remember that there are also some dads who bring children. As a priest I am somewhat unusual in having personal experience of bringing a toddler to Mass, and friends have suggested it should be part of seminary formation! Those present included one young family who spoke positively about the warmth of welcome and the things on offer but we should not take this for granted and we can certainly offer more activities and events. The family picnic during the mission was appreciated, and it is good to have things on at times that aren't too late for families. It was suggested we might have an event to mark All Saints' Day with an alternative to Hallowe'en; perhaps a group for parents to discuss the challenges of raising children in the faith and support one another. There are various resources that could be introduced in the parish such as the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd or Messy Church, perhaps to mark the seasons of the Christian year. These events can be multi-generational, offering something for parents and grandparents as well as children. A wide range of events is good but obviously we need volunteers to make these things happen! We can also raise awareness of the Sion Family Days now that we have a deeper connection with the Sion Community.

One of our children's liturgy leaders expressed gratitude to the rest of the congregation for enabling the children to sit in the front rows when they return at the offertory. This enables little conversations about things children see in the church, such as the tabernacle. Music is important and recently they practised the final hymn so children could join in. It was a big help during the mission having hymn words on a screen as books are more difficult for children. Going forward it seems better not to stop Children's Liturgy for half-term as it can cause confusion for parents and create a stop-start feel where continuity would be more beneficial. We might even think about continuing in Christmas and Easter holidays as these are particularly exciting times of the year for children.

Since the question about the message on the bag has a lot to do with **communication**, there were a number of contributions in this area. It is recognised that we need to communicate in many different ways in order to reach as many people as possible. To build a strong community we need to communicate effectively what is on offer, in such a way that also appeals to those we might draw through the doors of the church for the first time. This

includes the presentation of information on the noticeboards in the porch – what will catch the eye of parents taking their children into the porch for instance, or what will someone new to the parish see. We've recently launched a new website but we need to keep this fresh, as well as using social media effectively. A parish magazine – something we've had in the past – could be a great way to share people's stories. We might think about how we can provide up-to-date information to new and existing parishioners alike about all the groups and activities within the parish.

Where are we going?

What is the 'destination' for our parish? When Teresa asked me what my dream was, I said it was of a community of people keenly aware that we are called to become saints; and aware that we have to help each other get there by helping each other recognise our need of God and the help he gives us in order to share his life. One of the hallmarks of a saint is 'joy' so perhaps we could stick with that on the side of our hypothetical bags.

There was a great sense that we don't want just to be welcoming but a community where people really feel they **belong**. Naturally, people have a greater sense of belonging when they are active and involved in areas of parish life. Getting to know people is part of this, and can be difficult in a large parish. The area Masses last summer, the food afterwards, and the meals shared during the mission week were all seen as successful. It was apparent that someone can be part of the parish for many years and even quite active and yet not feel that they belong. The grief felt by some at the ending of the weekly Mass at St Peter's was acknowledged, as well as the positive experience of a smaller and largely self-reliant community. What can we bring from that experience to the larger parish community?

A couple of people recalled periods in our parish history when a host of activities and groups were able to flourish. Some things haven't helped – some relatively brief tenures of parish priest, not to mention covid, as well as perhaps a societal shift with people feeling they have less time to get involved with things.

A couple of people noted how important personal invitations are if we want people to get involved. These invitations don't have to come from me of course, because I'm not necessarily in the best position to know who to ask to do something.

When people are involved in specific areas of parish life, we become a community of communities. When we have a strong sense of belonging to a particular group – people who know us well enough to ask about things that might be going on in our lives, and who will notice if we've not been around for a couple of weeks – then we will also feel a stronger sense of belonging to the larger parish community.

Ideally there would be lots of things going on in the parish to appeal to different people and taking place at a range of time – and to some extent there already are, from social club to prayer group, choir to flower arrangers, children's liturgy to SVP. Some of these things that happen already could benefit from a higher profile – see communication above! Other ways of doing this include a monthly focus on one particular group, a 'groups fair' with stalls for each different group in the parish, and perhaps a yearly Mass and get-together to thank those involved in a particular ministry or service. It was also acknowledged that some groups come into being then fade away, depending on the interests of particular people, and they may re-emerge one day – a reminder of what has worked in the past might inspire others to come forward. Of course, we need to ensure this sense of belonging is always combined with welcome – one person spoke of having to push herself into groups: we shouldn't make it difficult for people.

Research has shown that **small groups** are a very effective way of growing a parish community – not just growing it in size, but growing that sense of belonging and commitment. This is something different from the groups relating to particular activities in the parish, but something focused on journeying together in our faith. This is certainly something I would like to explore, but it needs to be set up in the right way so that everyone understands what is expected and no one feels left out.

Rose, in summarising all that had been raised, reminded us that there is a lot that is wonderful in this parish and we should be thankful but rather than stay where we are we need to continue to work on welcome, communication, and finding ways to help people belong. There were many good ideas, and a really positive atmosphere overall, but not everything can be implemented straight away. Some things are relatively simple, and some things will need careful thought. Some things I can do, other things will rely on others to come forward. Rose suggested we come back to the notes from the meeting in six months time so please hold me to that! One thing is clear is that we need a real sense of ownership and responsibility. As Rose put it, if anyone was thinking "I wish we could do X out of all these" then don't wait for someone to ask you to do it – just come and ask me if I'm happy for you to get on with it. The restarting of children's liturgy last year was an excellent example of this happening.

There was a helpful question as we were wrapping things up. Why do we need to ask permission from Father Matthew, when we should be moving to a less clerical church? In fact the gospel for that week was a clear warning of the dangers of clericalism, which is counter-productive for clergy and laity alike. The danger is not only that clergy insist on running everything according to their own whims and placing burdens on the faithful – it is also that the laity diminish their own sense of baptismal vocation and responsibility, leaving the mission of the church to the 'professionals'. I don't believe that is something that I or you could fairly be accused of for the most part, but it's a trap we need to be aware of. However the alternative to clericalism is not a leaderless church. I have responsibility for this parish community and am accountable to the bishop. We need to ensure that we take things like safeguarding very seriously. It's important that activities carried out in the name of the church are consistent with our purpose, which is directed both upwards to God in worship and outwards in our mission to the world. Practically speaking, it's helpful for me to know what is happening so I can support it and direct people to it. Having said all that I'm absolutely delighted if people volunteer to do things and want them to feel empowered and have as much freedom as possible to take things forward. And whilst I'm not averse to setting up a parish council if that seems right, at the moment I think these open meetings, on a regular, termly basis, are the best way forward.

This is a long document: thank you for bearing with me, and apologies to anyone who felt their contribution wasn't sufficiently recognised. I'm grateful to Lucy for taking notes of the meeting, but take full responsibility for the editing.

Finally, a big thank you to Teresa and Rose for facilitating the conversation, for all those who came and contributed, as well as those who prayed for us even if they couldn't come, and for the very many people of our parish who already do great things. May God bless us as we move forward, giving thanks for the past 100 years. In this month of the Holy Souls, let us also pray for all those past parishioners whose legacy we have to build on.

Please pray for me as I do for you.

God bless,

Fr Matthew