



The new SHOFAR

Ordinary Sunday 22

Matthew 16:21-27 - The Gospel and the parish community

Living the Good News of Jesus sets us free

One of the key challenges for Christians today is that of bringing God alive in the day to day activities of all men and women. For many God remains remote, some kind of spiritual good idea who reigns somewhere “up there”. But the Good News is good because it reveals to us the way to live in relationship to other people and together in a loving relationship with God.

The Good News is all about people discovering in Jesus the power they need to become more fully human and more fully alive. It is not about an institution we call Church. At its best, the Church is a window open to what a living faith can bring to enrich human life. At its worst, it is a serious hindrance to those seeking understanding, meaning and healing from God.

The Gospel message is one of hope. This hope arises out of understanding how in Jesus we are set free from all kinds of bondages, burdens that are so prominent in today's world – addictions, violence, selfishness, body image, loneliness and more. It builds up the idea of a common life, one in which people seek to help each other in reaching those freedoms on offer. It is a declaration of a human truth – we are all *one in Christ*, children of God created in the image and likeness of the God who loves us.

The Church is NOT the Kingdom of God

The Church is not a community that owns the Good News; nor is it the official dispenser of the Good News. That is something God does and in growing his Kingdom among men and women, the Church is the preferred community tool in that mission.

But God also works amongst and through the most unlikely people and in the most unpredictable times. This is why the New Testaments so often calls believers to *be vigilant and alert* to the way God at this very moment is choosing to act through people He has chosen and empowered by divine grace. Often through those we have already dismissed as “not having what it takes”. When it comes to mission, opportunities and invitations pop up in the most unexpected places and growth takes place through the most surprising of people. The task of the local faith community is to be attuned to what God is doing and saying, for only in this collaboration with God's mission will fruit be produced.

For the Church/parish to be active and grow, there needs to be signs and tangible experiences of this new freedom available in Christ. We need to be offering to the world examples of people who have been freed from ignorance; from loneliness, social and political dogmatism, ecclesiastical narrowness, depression, guilt and a meaningless life. These are the very people our parishes should be producing and sending out as missionaries. It is only when the world can see *disciples who have been set free* and are living this new freedom can the Good News we say we proclaim is indeed alive in us. It is only by our fruits will others know Christ.

Church history is a rollercoaster of sin and faith

Repentance must be a central part of the communal life of every faith community and parish. We know how we *all sin* and to ignore this biblical warning is nothing short of arrogance and faithlessness. Because *we all sin* we need to repent, to acknowledge our sinfulness and our

need of God's healing balm. This is where we have something powerful to offer the world. Sin can be forgiven. Men and women can begin again in Christ. Divine love and mercy are far greater than any of our human limitations and weaknesses and so when people mess up their lives, it does not mean the end. Nor does it reduce them to a state of worthlessness.

The Church does not have to deny its sinful past, pretend evil things did not happen or hide away because of past moral failures. We must show the world the way forward by a life of humble contrition; acknowledging our dark sides and then by showing what a difference it can make to have God's healing forgiveness. We make restitution as best we can and then take up the new challenges. A lingering guilt is not the Kingdom way. Nor must past sins stop us from getting up and preaching once again the Good News of God's reign among us. We should not let the sins of believers become a reflection of the reality of God. Like all humans, we fall short of the goals we pursue and the demands and expectations made of us but in Christ it is never the end and we (the universal Church, local faith communities and individual believers) are defined by much more than our sins.

“Build each other up in the faith” – St Paul

This is one of Paul's favourite teachings and in many ways, it speaks of the heart of the Christian adventure. It fits in with his understanding of the need for every believer to reach his or her full potential in faith. He understood his own churches had their own collections of “hangers on”, those who wanted the blessings faith offered but were less willing to take up the responsibilities of sharing that with others.

Throughout the whole of the New Testament there is this same understanding – the faith is something that needs to be nurtured throughout the whole of our lives. It speaks of the three major ways of nurturing this faith –life shared in the faith community; listening to God speaking to them in the Scriptures and finally, participating in the life of the sacraments, particularly baptism and the Eucharist. While all of these have private aspects, they are all essentially parts of the Church where believers come together in order to support, encourage and nurture their fellow believers. This is not about “it's Sunday, we need to be in Church” but more about God created us, saved us and gave us a new life in Christ, invited us to share in the divine saving works in human history and invites us to live in peace with Him forever.

Faith and discipleship for Paul was about a corporate faith, a shared faith, a faith that reached out to the world in love and compassion – whatever the cost. It was at this point in the Church's history that the world began to step back and take notice. In the Empire, it was very much about individual needs, strengths, status, wealth and so on. While the rich and powerful prospered, they did so in the midst of the suffering, disempowered people in their own communities. It was those early Christians who reached out and built community, inviting in those who felt alienated and giving them a sense of belonging. It was when they began to mix with these outsiders, they began to find they had brought with them a whole array of talents and gifts that had never before been noticed or used. These people then went out and brought in their friends and family and slowly the Good News spread.

The parish is not our home. It is God's base station for mission

The local churches were not understood as being refuges for those weird people who believed in Jesus Christ as God's Son. Indeed, for most of the first one hundred years, with few exceptions, the only churches were home churches, places where believers would come to be nurtured and to nurture others. Christians would come together to build their relationship with each other and to deepen their lives in Christ. Having been renewed, healed and forgiven, they would then go back to their daily lives to witness to those still struggling in the darkness, dreariness and darkness of living in the brutal world of the time. They would show the hope, charity, joy, peace and optimism that God alone can provide.