FEBRUARY 9

THE NEW SHOFAR

Love pays attention. Love listens to the fears and the doubts of others and treats them with respect. Love accepts others the way Jesus accepts you. Rick Warren

We dare come into the presence of Almighty God?

There have always been basic drivers to my ordained ministry. The first one is that ordained or lay, all baptised men and women are called and anointed (baptism) to take the Good News of Jesus Christ out into the world. The second fundamental driver supporting that missionary initiative was the need for the minister to model imitating Christ for those to whom they are reaching out. Of course, we know from the ministry of Jesus, and from those first apostles and the Church down through history, there is no guarantee that the world is going to welcome that ministry, no certainty that they will not persecute, marginalise and even execute those who strive to be faithful to their callings. That too was drummed into me. That we cannot adjust the core biblical Truths to make them more acceptable to the world or preach them in ways that are designed not disturb the comfortable religion of the many. Why is it then, that our beloved Church today clearly fails so ignobly in its God-given vocation? At least that is the way the world sees us.

Many Christians live out their faith lives in struggling communities. They are in just about every way good people, faithful in their comfortable religion, a religion that did not require a passionate life in Christ. Many of them exhibit similar characteristics. Sadly, having church doors closed symbolises perfectly their status in the world. Locked away. Frightened to talk of God. A congregation with clear convictions as to whom it would welcome, and who they did not want sitting next to them on the pews: the sinners, the outcasts; the lepers, the prostitutes, the prodigal son, the type of people who represented the great unwashed, those with addictions and those on the margins. These same parishes are doomed to death because of these preferences but they cannot see it coming.

There is another sad yet common feature. There always seems to be pharisee-like members who resent most stridently the call to open their doors to God's poor ones, and they are the very first to jump ship, taking umbrage at attempts to be more Gospel focussed. They prefer to fire cannonballs from outside to working as leaven on the inside. They dramatically draw the line at dying for others and could not countenance embracing the rabble (especially if those people were near impossible to work alongside). They seem to have misunderstood the love commandment of the Lord Jesus Christ, content to make it more flexible and conveniently blind to the needs of some. Christianity could not be more comfortable.

God *never* wants more of the same

Sadly today there are too many others who seemed dedicated to a continuation of all those things that have run the Church down into a state of near extinction in some places. Outward show and fine words were more important than the saving of souls. Conformity to a self-endorsing ecclesiastical hierarchy of greater importance than breaking bread with the hungry, the thirsty; than clothing the naked, visiting the sick, housing those who were

vulnerable. Sheep in wolves clothing is likely to be the response of Jesus to that kind of inverted, false evangelism. Humanly, though, it is easier to just conform.

The psalmist today maps out for us a more God-like pathway…*I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise…*This is the Jesus way of a "God first" mission. Nowhere in psalm 138 is there anything other than a God orientation. No matter the personal cost to the individual, David understood where missionary success was to be found, was guaranteed in terms of the primacy of the divine will- *Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;* Forget about opposition, ignore all "enemies" and allow God to rule. Only God can grow the Church, but he leaves the sowing to us. He collaborates with us but will not do our "work" for us.

Cast your net onto the other side of the boat

In our reading from Luke, we have a significant narrative, one even more profound given its proximity to the opening of the Gospel. The focus of the miracle is not initially on the boat, or the fish or even the apostles. It is about "fishing" as a response to the command of the Lord. On their own they could fish all day and all night and catch nothing. They are the empty netters, those going through the emotions of fishing without the guarantee of catching something. They fail because God is not in what they chose on their own.

The calculating is simple: obedience and faithfulness to Christ results in full nets, in having hunger satisfied and the offer of a life of "riches" and a fullness of expectations. This is why the story is a part of the first ministries of Jesus as he begins his own journey to carry out the work of his Father. It is a part of the narratives of victory over evil spirits, of him bringing healing, life and new beginnings to those neither Judaism nor the wider Roman empire could bring light and healing.

He was rejected in Nazareth, fulfilled the prophesy of Isaiah in that he understood that he was called *to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, [19] to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.* The Church has long understood how this ministry of Jesus is mandated by our Saviour as the model for the ministry given to each baptised person.

Fear not! I am with you always

This kind of vision of Church and ministry can scare many of us, many of the "faithful" today. It is this fear and uncertainty that gives in to the temptation to circle the wagons and look after what we think we have. Sadly, the Way of Christ is the Way of the Cross. It is not about the self but begins and ends with reaching out and loving the "other", all others. No exceptions. Is that one reason Christian communities across the West are struggling, that living in the Kingdom of God just asks too much? That imitating Christ on the cross is impossible for us, an unattainable aspiration.

The Apostles' mission, maintained by the early Church, continues to serve as the model for evangelization today. Often marked by martyrdom, this mission spans from Christianity's beginnings to modern times. Martyrs give credibility to faith by sacrificing their lives for Christ, placing obedience to God before self-interest. They exemplify a defenceless yet powerful love for humanity. Such was their love that they offered up their lives as Jesus stated: "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you".