

Along the track

Past, Present, Future

During a recent parish planned giving campaign, we were confronted by the rather challenging question: "If your church disappeared tomorrow, would your community miss it?" Or put another way, can we say "Our town is a better place because of our church." Christ gives us a choice to follow him – or not. We weren't called to be passengers, but disciples, followers of him, promoters of his message in word and in action. What message do we want our church to give our community today? What does it need?

The late Pope Francis wrote: "Rivers do not drink their own water; trees do not eat their own fruit. The sun does not shine on itself, and flowers do not spread their fragrance for themselves. Living for others is a rule of nature. We are all born to help each other."

Jesus invited people to join a community with that vision. Jesus showed how this community could be a source of unity, forgiveness and reconciliation among people and just as He empowered others, sustained them, healed them and served them, so this community was called to do the same.

Jesus welcomed those who opted to join this new movement. They were baptised with water. In the dry desert conditions of his land, water was precious and the source of life for plants, animals as well as humans. But it was more than that. Members of this new community were given new life, and entrusted with the mission to bring new life to others and the world they (and we) live in. This community was invited to bring to life the vision of God. How do you think your community does that? How do we and our community respond to Jesus' call to reach out, to help others, to bring the message of love, reconciliation and welcome.

I was told a story years ago by a person who lived in the channel country of western Queensland. When he was young and the rains had started up in the Gulf, he and his friends used to stand in one of the many channels and wait for the water. They could hear it coming. It rose very quickly, filled the channel and, more often than not, flooded the area. And the country came to life. Long dormant vegetation re-emerged, the birds and animals re-appeared. Water brought life and revived what was there, waiting. Being a disciple is not just about sharing Christ's message but bringing it to life wherever it may be.

Sometimes we plant new seeds, sometimes we are called to revitalise what may be lying dormant. Faith isn't just about proclaiming doctrine but also about discerning where God may already be at work, looking for signs of the Gospel at work, love, justice, compassion, in the world and in people's lives, even in unexpected places, affirming the good already present. Pope Francis urged us: "Instead of being just a church that welcomes and receives by keeping the doors open, let us try also to be a church that finds new roads, that is able to step outside itself".

It wasn't going to be easy, he warned them. This new community did not exist for its own sake, but to be, in Jesus' words, leaven, the light on the hill, salt of the earth. Our fractured world is certainly in need of something that will bring us together, something that will give us hope.

Sometimes the world does not want to hear our message, people may choose different directions, different ways, different priorities. Jesus warned I am sending you out to be like sheep among wolves Mt. 10: 16. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too (Jn 15). This isn't going to be a comfortable ride. But I won't leave you orphans, I will not abandon you. I will be with you always, even to the end of time.

There is a scene near the end of the movie Conclave Pope where Cardinal Benitez, who is about to be elected Pope, ends his pivotal speech by telling his brother cardinals, "The Church is what we do next." It is a reminder that the Church is alive, acting, listening, serving, worshipping, welcoming, challenging. The Church is about what we are doing and why.

Be the church. Be the gospel, Pope Francis said on several occasions: He reminded us: "Today, we need a Church capable of walking at people's side, of doing more than simply listening to them; a Church which accompanies them on their journey."

Regards
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