

Along the track

Good News...For a Change

Some time ago I watched a TV program* on how some dairy farmers and people in the fishing industry were facing the challenge of a lifetime to save family farms and protect a way of life. They faced downturns in their industries, the collapse of co-ops, plunging prices for their products and rising prices for what they needed and, as if that weren't enough, along came the droughts, fires and flooding rains. Despite the fact that many had given up and left, these farmers were surviving and even prospering in hard times.

These good news stories were not only about economic survival – they were stories of courage and determination despite the setbacks and gloomy outlooks, they were stories about long held traditions and methods (sometimes for three, four, five generations) and their pride in them but perhaps more importantly, how they had adapted them and applied them into something suitable for today. As more than one of them said with some passion, if we had just kept on doing the same, like many others we would have had to sell up and leave.

Another common factor was that all of them relied on a supportive community, from regular social gatherings to farmers' markets and creating small co-ops. Without that support, encouragement and contact, what they have managed to achieve together would not have been possible. In one way or another, these communities supported each other and reached out to others in their district – they were not just about personal survival or enrichment.

In some ways it is a reminder of what is happening in our church where we live modern lives but try to live an old-time religion. We struggle to live out the message of Christ in today's world. In Pope Francis' words, we should have the "courage to bring life and not make our Christian life a museum of memories." He warned against the temptation to reduce faith to something that belongs in the past, as if it "were a beautiful illuminated book to be kept in a museum. Once it is locked up in the archives of history, faith loses its power to transform, its living beauty, its positive openness to all," he said.

These farmers took what they had learned over years and years and applied that to today. What was worth keeping, what were the 'enablers,' the ways worth preserving? But they were open to new ways, new methods. Pope Francis again: "Yet we might also wonder: what is the Lord asking us to build today and even more importantly, upon what is he calling us to

build in our lives?" Memory is recalling "what the Lord has done in and for us," that "God has chosen us, loved us, called us and forgiven us. Great things have happened in our personal love story with him, and these must be treasured in our minds and hearts." So giving ourselves time to reflect on that is the first building block in what we are trying to build today. How do we enable others to experience that? Faith "is born and reborn from a life-giving encounter with Jesus, from experiencing how his mercy illumines every situation in our lives."

I was once invited to one of the evangelical churches – over a few visits I was impressed with how we were asked in silence to recall the miracle of God's action through Jesus Christ in our lives over the last seven days. After the silent reflection, each one in small groups gave testimony to this action, from the small and seemingly inconsequential occurrence to the sometimes dramatic and 'life-changing miracle'. It was a skillful combination of quiet prayer, contemplation and reflection, testifying to my own faith not just in a community recitation of the Creed. I wonder how that might enrich our celebration of the Eucharist?

Christianity is a communal endeavour. These farmers knew that their survival needed community – without a shared commitment, the support of others, without gathering together, without sharing of ideas and resources, they were lost. In turn, that also led to an outreach to their local communities. A community that looks inwards, that is about its own survival eventually dies. We find description of an early Christian community in Acts 4: *All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.... And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them.*

We are not always one in mind, but we can be one in heart. The possessions these farmers and fishers shared were experience, skills and know how and they shared them willingly. Being one in heart leads to common action, by reaching out because of our shared belief in the goodness of others and our shared belief that God's grace is alive and well and at work within all of us. Such a faith retains its power to transform, its living beauty, its positive openness to all.

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Regards
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