

Towards a Vision Statement - February 2021

Last Advent I offered three talks: Witness in Faith, Walking in Hope and Worship & Charity. One of my hopes was to set people thinking about the forthcoming Parish Assembly and our pastoral priorities going forward. In one sense the setting of any parish's pastoral priorities is straightforward: the Church exists to evangelise, to build up the kingdom of God, to make Christ known, for it is in knowing Christ, in drawing closer to Christ and the Kingdom, that our happiness and wholeness, our fulfilment, subsist. However, every parish finds itself in a particular setting or context. Every parish has its own particular challenges and every parish has its own supply, usually finite, of resources. Inevitably, evangelising, proclaiming the Kingdom, being and building up the Body of Christ, means that choices have to be made; energy, time and finances, these need to be used in a focused way. In presenting this 'vision' my hope is to offer a lens through which we might shape our pastoral priorities, use our resources well, and in so doing harness the involvement, faith and growth of that most precious of resource, our parishioners.

The following 'vision' statement, which you are invited to comment on, groups the proposed pastoral priorities, under three headings, welcome, worship and witness. As well as commenting on the vision itself, any thoughts or reflections on how this vision might be implemented, and in particular any reflections on how it might be implemented, and the implications for the current structuring of - Parish Pastoral Council, Strategy Groups and Parish Assembly - would be much appreciated.

Towards a Vision Statement

*Being & Building the Body of Christ through the quality of our welcome,
the beauty of our worship, the conviction of our witness.*

Welcome

In part, the welcome we offer to people, has everything to do with their experience of the Sunday Liturgy; how they are welcomed at the door, their experience of and participation in the liturgy itself and whether others take the trouble to say hello. But feeling and being 'welcome' is so much more than being greeted at the door, given a hymn book, shown to a seat, invited to coffee afterwards or handed a registration form. Yes, these are beginnings, vital beginnings. First impressions count. However, a deep seated sense of welcome involves much more.

Firstly, it seems to me that, a deep-seated sense of welcome, of feeling 'at home' depends upon a sense of safety or security. Here there are obvious implications for our approach to health and safety, but also more especially for our approach to the safeguarding of the young and vulnerable, the centrality of which must be underscored.

Again, I want to suggest that the sense of being welcome has everything to do with somebody feeling understood and appreciated, about their being space for their ideas as well as the particular gifts and talents they have to offer, and whether or not the community recognises that the presence of another represents nothing less than a reshaping of who or what it is. As such the welcoming community takes the time to know its newcomers, promotes and fosters their participation, and thinks twice before saying 'this is how "we" do things'.

Just as important to a sense of being welcome and the whole sense of belonging is a familiarity with and understanding of all that constitutes the tick of parish life. The only mystery in a parish is the mystery we celebrate in the Eucharist; the mystery of faith, of Christ's living, dying and rising again. Here effective communication, a knowledge of the what, when, why and how of things, is key, as is the recognition that our virtual and website presence is as much a front door, as much an arena for welcome, as the front door itself.

Worship

At the heart of every parish is the Sunday Eucharist. It is here that we are most ourselves and from it that everything flows. It is in the Eucharist that we feed on Christ sacramentally, so as to be his Body in the world.

In terms of Worship and pastoral priorities the full, conscious and active participation of all the faithful, young and old, must be our primary concern. Here, people's understanding of the liturgy – the Eucharist - and what it means to 'actively' participate is crucial, as is the ongoing recruitment, faith formation and training of the various ministers that the liturgy draws on (musicians and singers, welcomers, servers, readers, Eucharistic ministers, collectors, flower arrangers, sacristans etc). Equally important is the co-ordination of the various ministries, the preparation of and for the seasons of the year, as well as the planning for individual liturgies. Our aim should be that every person in the parish is engaged in some voluntary ministry in our church.

As a parish it should be acknowledged that liturgically speaking, we are greatly blessed in terms of our Worship, but I believe that there is one area in respect of our welcome and worship that we do need to address; namely the physical environment or space in which we gather. For me the remodelling and relighting of the forecourt immediately in front of the church, of which the inclusion of glass doors would be a key feature, would be an important step towards creating a more open and welcoming environment where parishioners could gather more easily and safely both before but especially after Mass. A more attractive and open church front will also encourage passers-by to look in or call in to find out more about the Catholic community in St Albans and its worship.

At the same time, I think we need to look at the church itself. If in the years to come there are to be fewer priests that will inevitably mean fewer Masses, and if there are to be fewer Masses - with a greater premium on seating capacity - can we really afford a sanctuary which extends so far into the nave? In other words, is there a way of giving voice to the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council which does not involve the loss of so much seating? Moreover, I think it is worth asking ourselves whether or not our church, as it is, physically expresses what takes place in the Eucharist – does its layout, decoration, fixtures and fittings adequately reflect the fact that it is the church, the community, in its fullest sense – both temporal and eternal – that gathers in this place at the celebration of the Eucharist. This isn't to say that things need to be heavily ornate in order to express the richness of what takes place in the eucharist, but it is to say, as the church intimates, that a 'noble' simplicity should characterise the liturgy and the environment in which its celebration takes place. How, for example, might we better express the relationship between the chair, the ambo and the altar and ensure that the materials and design used for each reflect their connectedness and the fact that Christ is present in the person of the presider at the chair, in the Word that is proclaimed at the ambo, and the bread and wine that is consecrated on the altar. Equally, shouldn't the material used at the Tabernacle be linked to the material used at the altar where the bread is consecrated. Again, the font is the place where our Christian life begins, where we are baptised into the life, death and resurrection of Christ; is it fitting, worthy or noble that it should be located at the back of the church such that baptisms which take place at the front, so that everyone can see, are done in a portable basin?

Indeed, quite apart from the liturgy, it should also be recognised that a church is more than a functional space, there to facilitate the celebration of the Eucharist. Outside of the Mass it remains a house of prayer, a place of and for devotion, where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved and where people come to raise their hearts and minds to God. As a building it needs to serve that private devotion which is so central a part of catholic spirituality and piety. How are we to make it a more intimate and attractive environment to facilitate and encourage the prayer of those who visit during the day?

Witness

Over and again Christ reminds us that the love of neighbour is not an optional extra; that ignoring the needy is tantamount to ignoring him. One of the great legacies which the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart have gifted to us as a community is what one might call a social conscience. In its generosity and support of so many initiatives both locally and internationally the parish continues to evidence its care for those in need. It is here that we are faithful to Christ who calls us to love our neighbour and who challenges us to see him first and foremost in the need of others. It is here, in our walking with those in need, where action speaks louder than words, that we are at our most convincing. However, in order for our good deeds to be a witness, and by witness we mean the proclamation of Christ, we ourselves must be rooted in Him, loving because this is what we are called to, regardless of its bringing others to Him or not.

Employing Christ's reaching out and addressing the needs of his disciples on the Road to Emmaus which reaches its high point or fulfilment in the celebration of the Eucharist, I would like, under this canopy of Witness, to propose two pastoral priorities: faith formation and accompaniment where accompaniment is understood as our walking with others in times of transition and need. The following is not an exhaustive or prescriptive but highlights the kind of activities that might fall within a pastoral priority.

Faith Formation:

- Prayer
- Adult Faith Formation
 - Small Communities
 - Scripture Groups
 - Advent & Lent Talks
 - Alpha Groups
- Catechesis / Sacramental Preparation
 - Baptism
 - First Reconciliation
 - First Holy Communion
 - Confirmation
 - RCIA
 - Marriage

Accompaniment:

- At Home:
 - Young People
 - Newcomers
 - Young Families
 - Bereaved
 - Elderly & Housebound

- Abroad:
 - In the local community
 - Homeless
 - Internationally
 - CAFOD

Conclusion

In presenting this 'Vision' statement for discussion I am conscious that we have two parish primary schools and that drawing these, but especially the children and families involved, into the life of the parish community is crucial. Indeed, a Catholic school does not make sense apart from the parish community in which is located. In fleshing out our pastoral priorities and asking who it is that we as a parish community should be accompanying, the link between the parish, its schools and the families they serve, should be in the forefront of our minds.

I am also conscious that the parish comprises two 'Sunday' communities; one at St John Fisher School in Marshalswick and the other at the main church in the city centre. We still have two priests and while we have two priests, I would envisage our continuing as we are, however the day may well come when our two priests become one priest, or our two priests will be asked to serve more than one parish. At that stage a robust look at our Sunday arrangements will be necessary. If and when that day comes, and I think it prudent to prepare for it, my hope is that however the challenges are resolved every constituent is not only heard but heard on a level footing. Going forward therefore we need to ensure that the pastoral priorities we adopt are owned across the board and that the structures to support them draw in the worshipping communities that comprise our parish.

Fr Michael O'Boy, Parish Priest