

EMBRACING CHANGE

Elements from the Pentecost Sunday Service in Saint John's Church, Stevenston on 9 June 2014

Introduction and text of the leaflet distributed after the service

The priests of this Deanery have been engaged in a series of meetings to find a way forward in response to the Diocesan initiative entitled Embracing Change. *For the full text of their discussions please see parish websites or ask for a copy from your parish.*

Two professional facilitators were employed, Paul McColgan and David Ramsey. We have reached the stage in the process where we feel ready to share our thoughts with all of our parishioners in a more formal way.

There was mutual agreement about many things, especially the belief that the present state of affairs is unsustainable. Also, the vision presented by Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, was seen to be a source of encouragement.

Having already invited the Deanery parishes to take part in 'an hour of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament' on the first six Sundays of Lent - which met with a very positive response - most of the priests have continued to address the matter of Embracing Change in their homilies or bulletin inserts during the Easter Season. There is a genuine sense of hopefulness among the group. As the process developed, three distinct categories seemed worthy of further consideration by priests and laity together.

What are the concerns about the here and now?

- What the Church says doesn't make sense to many people.
- There is a feeling that we need and are ready to change.
- We have a rich spirituality but it needs to grow and adapt for what lies ahead. We need a deeper relationship with God.

What are our hopes for the future?

- Our hope is for a joyful Church, free from fear, able to be real, grown-up, compassionate, and fit to know a loving God in the twenty-first century.
- Change means going forward and not going back. We can make a positive difference.
- Change is already happening. We recognise the need to seek new ways of being Church. There are signs that people's faith is deepening.

What can we do?

- We can pool resources and unearth gifts and talents that are currently under used.
- We can encourage people to use their skills, and rejoice in each other's gifts.
- We can work together, and share what we've got.
- We have the courage to 'let go'.

Future Events

Two events have been organised which are important to the development of this process.

- a Prayer Service on Pentecost Sunday 8 June at 3.00 pm in Saint John's Stevenston
- a meeting for all the parishes in the local area - this Deanery - on Sunday 29 June at 3.00 pm in Saint Matthew's Academy, Saltcoats

Prayer used during the service

Lord, God. We your people come together in prayer. Jesus, your Son, promised to be with us until the end of time and to give us His Spirit – that we might all be one. Our natural inclination is to go our own way and to establish our own individual kingdoms – but that is not what Jesus asked of us. His prayer for us is that we might all be one, as He is in you and you are in Him. Help us to find anew that spirit of oneness which will renew our strength, our courage and our optimism and enable us to renew the face of the earth. We are one Church. Help us to express this in our parishes as we learn to work more closely together recognising that there are all sorts of service to be done, but always to the same Lord: working in different ways in all sorts of different people; it is the same Lord who is working in all of us. Never my own need, always the need of our Church. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen

Magisterial reflection used during the service

During the Second Vatican Council, the Church tried to address all the people of the world expressing the Church's desire to dialogue with the whole human family by using the common language of 'personhood' - meaning that the human person is the 'point of contact' between the concerns of the Church and those of the world.

The Church said "The joys and the hopes, the grief and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted - these are the joys and hopes, the grief and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of all people. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for everyone. That is why this community realises that it is truly linked with humanity and its history by the deepest of bonds. Hence this Second Vatican Council, having probed more profoundly into the mystery of the Church, now addresses itself without hesitation, not only to the children of the Church and to all who invoke the name of Christ, but to the whole of humanity. For the council yearns to explain to everyone how it conceives of the presence and activity of the Church in the world of today."

Pope Francis released a new document entitled *Evangelii Gaudium*. It is devoted to the theme of the new evangelisation. As suggested by the name, the principal theme involves the need for a joyful proclamation of the Gospel to the entire world.

If we were to sum up Pope Francis's *Evangelii Gaudium* in a few words, we could say that it is a teaching document written around the theme of Christian joy in order that the Church may rediscover the original source of spreading the Gospel in the world. Pope Francis offers this document to the Church as a map and guide to her pastoral mission in the near future. It is an invitation to recover a prophetic and positive vision of reality without ignoring the current challenges. Pope Francis instils courage and urges us to look ahead despite the present crisis, making the cross and the resurrection of Christ once again our 'victory banner'.

The following seven points, gathered together in the five chapters of the document, constitute the fundamental pillars of Pope Francis' vision of the new evangelisation.

- 1 the reform of the Church to be a missionary Church
- 2 the Church understood as all the People of God which evangelises
- 3 the homily and its preparation
- 4 the social inclusion of the poor
- 5 peace and social dialogue
- 6 the spiritual motivations for the Church's missionary action

The cement which binds these themes together is concentrated in the merciful love of God: the life of every person acquires meaning in the encounter with Jesus Christ and in the joy of sharing this experience of love with others.

Homily preached during the service

The fact that we are gathered here on the Feast of Pentecost is no accident. The parallels between what happened in Jerusalem on this day two thousand years ago and what is happening here this afternoon are almost too obvious to mention. Both then and now the Church was facing a challenging and uncertain future. The first Pentecost marked the beginning of its journey through history as the Holy Spirit came down on the Apostles gathered in the upper room, pushing them out into the world to proclaim the Good News in every age. This Pentecost, that same Holy Spirit moves among us as we gather in this room, asking God to stir in us some of the courage and commitment we need as we struggle to take the next step on that journey and embrace the profound changes that have already begun to happen and which will become more and more urgent as the years pass. And as we confront those changes, the two readings we have just heard have much to say to us.

As we joined the story of the Resurrection in John's Gospel, we found Mary outside the tomb on Easter morning, weeping. And is this not what many in the Church today are doing? Faced with declining numbers, fewer priests and the need for parishes to close or amalgamate, many mourn the passing of what we have always known and long for a return to what used to be. But when we do this, we are like Mary Magdalen, standing outside an empty tomb, weeping. The tomb is the past and Jesus is not in it. The Church we once knew has gone for ever. It's not coming back. The truth which Mary had not yet understood was that the Jesus she thought she had lost had risen and the reason she could not see him was that she was looking in the wrong place. Jesus, John tells us, was actually standing behind her as she looked into the tomb and she had to turn right round and look in the opposite direction before she could recognise him. And it's the same today. We will find Jesus, not in the past, but in the future. Yes, we face many challenges, and the future, as it was for Mary and the others that morning, is unclear. But all of this is as it should be. For there to be new life there first has to be death. Integration is always preceded by disintegration. Many of the crises facing the Church today are no more than an old Church decaying and dying so that a new one can be born. The disciples were in despair on Easter morning. But events were already moving in a direction they were not yet able to understand. God was doing then what God is still doing now, turning death into life in a never-ending process of renewal and change.

That changes are going to happen is not in question. Indeed, there are parts of our diocese where these changes are already much further advanced than they are here in North Ayrshire. But that will soon change. The facts and statistics are staring us in the face and were laid out for us in the document entitled Embracing Change which was sent out to the parishes for discussion several months ago. But while changes are inevitable, there is nothing inevitable about the way we respond to them. Initially at least, people are not going to like it, and that is only natural. They will not find it easy when they have to let go of what is familiar and maybe leave Churches where they and their parents were married, where their children were baptised, where they celebrated family funerals and go to another place which they may even have seen for years as some kind of rival organisation. But faced with the reality of what is going to happen, we can do one of two things. We can resist the changes, as some will undoubtedly do, and like Mary Magdalen in this afternoon's Gospel passage, stand weeping outside an empty tomb while the rest of the world moves on. Or we can do what the people in the first reading did. They came together and shared everything in common. We can do the same with people from neighbouring parishes. They sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed. We can do that, too, as we pool, not

just our financial and physical resources, but all the other gifts spread throughout the parishes in North Ayrshire. They went as a body to the Temple, and we can do the same as we learn to worship with people who, up to now, have been like strangers to us. Writing to the Corinthians two thousand years ago, St Paul weeps over the divisions which are afflicting the community there. Some are for Paul, some are for Apollos, some are for Cephas, some are for Christ. But has Christ been divided up, cries Paul, words we will have to remember whenever we find ourselves saying, 'I am for Saint John's, I am for Saint Mary's, I am for Saint Peter's'. It may be that the time will come when some of our buildings will have to close, but we will get nowhere if it always has to be someone else's.

But these structural changes are nothing compared to the much deeper transformation that will have to happen if we are to become a Church fit for the twenty-first century, and the key to understanding this takes us back to Mary Magdalen. Even when Mary leaves behind the empty tomb of the past, turns round and sees Jesus, she still does not recognise him. She only does so when he speaks her name, 'Mary' and she speaks his 'Rabbuni'. The people of West Kilbride have often heard me quote the words of William Johnston, a Jesuit from Derry who lived most of his life in Japan. 'The Church of the twenty-first century' he says 'must give people mysticism or die.' The real change facing us today is not about priests and parishes. It's about a whole new way of being the Church. It's about going deeper. It's about leaving behind the world of religion and entering the world of faith. It's about developing a life of personal prayer. It's about moving beyond infantile ways of thinking about God. It's about making a reality in our parishes the vision held up before us fifty years ago in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. It's about growing up and becoming an adult Church, not first and foremost for our own sakes, but for the sake of the generations who will come after us, your grandchildren and great grandchildren.

So let's not fail them.

The meeting in Saint Matthew's Academy, Saltcoats on Sunday 29 June at 3.00 pm is open to everyone. Please come and have your say.

The meeting will be based on the prayer and reflection we are undertaking on the Sunday afternoon periods of prayer during Lent, on the service we held on Pentecost Sunday and on our own hopes for the future and on mutual respect.