

The Bishop's Charge
136th Synod of the Diocese of Fredericton
Fredericton, NB
November 4, 2017

Then a lawyer asked Jesus a question to tempt him, "Master which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus answered him "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

And the second is like it: you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets".

(Matthew 22:35-40)

One of Tina Turner's greatest hits was "What's Love Got to Do with It?" The answer from the view point of Jesus is absolutely everything. Being a follower of Jesus is pretty simple: we are to love God through him and love our neighbours, period.

Why is love so central? Because God is love and Jesus shows it. In Colossians 1:15 we are told that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. When we look at Jesus we see God. In 1 Corinthians 12:27 Paul tells the church that they are the Body of Christ. When People look at the Church they should see Christ and thereby God. If God is love then we are to be love. But love is risky, because it can lead to crucifixion.

When I gave my first Bishop's Charge in 2015 I said that one of the most important things for us to realize is that faith is spelt R•I•S•K. One of the problems with risk is that it is a very scary place to be and few of us would put ourselves in that position if we were able to choose not to. The following phrase is attributed to William Shakespeare:

"Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them".

We could say the following about our diocese:

Some are born risk takers, some achieve risk-taking and some have risk thrust upon them.

The worst case scenario, is the latter, having the need to take risk thrust upon us. For some of our parishes that has been the case during the last year or so. Some have risen to the challenge and have begun to work their way out of their difficulties, sadly others have not been able to do so for a variety of reasons and things continue to be hard.

During the past few months a small group of us has been trying to assess the situation in our parishes with the statistics we have. In many ways the yardsticks are inadequate, but they give some insight.

In total, we have 72 parishes as well as the Cathedral. The two measures we have are: giving and average attendance. These records are fairly complete from 2000, but the main interest is the last 5 years.

They pan out as follows:

26 have grown numerically, 11 showing double digit percentage growth.

8 have remained numerically stable.

50 parishes have shown growth in average giving, of which 23 are in double percentage digits.

These numbers tell part of the story and I want us to be encouraged by them. Please share this good news with those in your parishes. Often I hear people telling me that things are going from bad to worse. I am not suggesting that we are out of the woods by any means, but there are signs of hope.

As I said this is a somewhat inadequate way of looking at the situation, because it does not account for the ways in which congregations and individuals are engaged in God's mission. The best way to measure this is to assess what is our Missional Footprint. Where are we impacting the communities we are called to serve with the Good News of Jesus, God loves you?

Later this morning we will get some insights into how this is developing in some of our parishes. The good news is that this Synod has been able to provide funding for initiatives across the diocese. Capturing information about our missional footprint is notoriously difficult to capture, but there will be an attempt to do so at some point during the next year.

Some people may ask why we would bother with such a measure. In 1931 the Swiss theologian Emil Brunner wrote:

The Church exists by mission as a fire by burning.

The Church in the Western World does not seem to have grasped this when it comes to proclaiming the Gospel in our own backyard. If Brunner is correct then we are treading a very dangerous path. If we, as a diocese, are to become more mission focused we need to know what we are doing in this regard, then we can build upon it.

We are to take the words of John 3:16 very seriously:

"God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that all who believe [better, put their complete and utter trust] in him shall not perish, but have eternal life".

When we consider God's attitude towards his creation we see it as one of love. We need to understand the nature of what we say we believe if we are going to be effective in the mission of God. God's attitude is one of total, self-giving love. He literally holds nothing back. In Philippians 2 Paul reminds us that Jesus completely empties himself to become a servant.

The compassion of God for his creation is limitless and those of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus are called to love without limits. I know this is hard and we cannot get there all at once, in fact we may not be able to get there at all, but we need to continue to walk towards the goal.

Honestly, we cannot even begin to walk this walk in any way effectively, if we do not fix our eyes upon Jesus. We all remember the story of Peter when he was walking on the water; he was fine when he looked at Jesus, but as soon as he looked at the wind and the waves crashing around him he began to sink.

As I have said many times before, in the culture of Jesus's day the ocean was symbolic of uncontrolled chaos. Life in the Church and the world today can feel like that and if we only look to things like structures, buildings, the markers that have helped us to feel secure in the past, we will ultimately be lost.

Please do not think that I am saying that we will not exist. I think that in some form or another we can go on for a very long time. More Bishops of Fredericton will be added to the picture board. The question I have is will we exist or will we thrive? Will Jesus be glorified? Will we love?

If we, as part of the church in this province, are to show Jesus, to be Jesus in our communities, then we have to be willing to be engaged with others in new and costly ways.

At recent conference in Nova Scotia the keynote speaker, Canon Phil Potter, provided a great image to help us think through the situation in which we find ourselves. Historically the Church has seen itself as a lighthouse protecting people from the rocks and calling them to come to it for safety. Nowadays he said, fewer and fewer people recognize the lighthouse or know what it is for.

The situation we have now is rather like people floating on rafts across the ocean. There are small groups and large groups. People may even live on several rafts, swimming between them at different times. Each of these rafts has a culture: one may be work, the other the gym, many different things.

The task of the Church is to know which raft we are on or to swim out to the rafts and join the people there. We need to learn from them what is important for them and look to see where God is already working. We can then help them to see the importance of God in their situation. It means that the ways in which we do mission adapts to those we seek to serve, rather than expecting them to adapt to us.

I have said this type of thing to many people over the years and the answer has often come back "Well how can we be effective in our mission? You often say that this is how we should be, but how"?

Today we are going to work our way through a book called *Surprise the World*. As with all such things it is not a guaranteed solution to all our ills, but what I can say is that as I look at my ministry over the years I have done many of these things, not really knowing that I was, and have found they have worked.

Have they packed the church buildings where I have served? No. That is not the point. The point is that we are to be the Body of Christ in our community aiming to see people living fulfilled and fulfilling lives with the opportunity to know Jesus.

The acronym for this is BELLS:

Bless

Eat

Listen

Learn

Sent

This leads us into a direction which is very risky for us. We will be looking outwards rather than inwards. We will not be concentrating on what is good for us but what is the best for others. We will be making a difference in the communities where we live with the intention of seeing people enter into communion with God through Jesus the Son.

If this is to happen we have to turn to one of the basic pillars of our faith, prayer. Many of you may feel that we cannot pray or that perhaps there are no set prayers to meet our situation. In a sense that does not matter, because prayer is to be in the presence of God in an intentional way.

A simple prayer is to be in silence in a comfortable place and repeat these words over and over:

“Jesus, Saviour of the world, have mercy on me”.

It may not sound like much but it creates a space for God to intervene and us to listen. We do not need to be afraid of the new reality we face, it is no surprise to God, but how we are to serve him at this time will mean we have to listen and be willing to change. If we cannot do this then it is likely that we will lose even what we have.

Some of you may ask at the end of today, well what has this to do with Synod. The answer is quite simple. As your Bishop, I believe that this is the direction in which we should travel as a diocese. As part of the leadership in your parish I am asking you to take these ideas back with you and begin to work them out. We will all work it out in different ways across the diocese. Some of us will be able to risk large scale things and others small things but we need to set our shoulders to the wheel for the Kingdom of God.

Why? So that all the families of the earth shall be blessed.