

Reflection 28th November 2010

A couple of events in recent times have highlighted for me the situation of the Church in this village, and in the society at large. Twice in the last month, people who are not members of the congregation have said 'How is the Church going?' I reply 'Well, we are in a precarious state!' My conversation partners have then said 'Well that's a shame. We hope you don't have to go! You brighten up the place. We appreciate having you around.' On the other hand, Jenny told a story in Church the other Sunday about how someone who did not know that Jenny was a Church member said, 'What's he doing speaking to you?' when I greeted her outside the supermarket. Again, the other day, a person for whom I had conducted a funeral when I first arrived tugged my sleeve as I was doing some shopping and spoke to me about a family situation that was bothering her.

Just this week too, two people have said to me 'What has happened to the sign? I always read it, and like it. You haven't been changing it as much!' They were right. So I resolved to keep up the 'sinage'. These encounters point to the Church as a presence in the community. This can only happen when there *is* a physical community, as there is in Alexandria. In the city, people move from suburb to suburb, and there is less togetherness around a suburb. More often, communities are communities of choice, and so people might drive to be part of a 'like minded group'.

But here, in a geographic community, the Church has a role to play in bringing a 'profile' to things of the Spirit to the people of this community, before they hear the call of God to other things.

Sometimes having any kind of a profile is going to cause some opposition, as we saw with the story that Jenny told, but in general, I think that standing for something positive and serious about the message of the Church, and not just 'fluffiness' that adds a bit of religious icing to an already baked cake is worth some degree of opposition.

The congregation as a whole also needs to 'stand for' something, and be seen to be standing for something. This is our 'witness' as Christians in Alexandria at a corporate level. If we are just 'those people who happen to belong to 'that' club' then there is no reason why anyone should join us because they can say 'Oh, some people pray and some don't. It's a matter of choice'. But if we 'stand for something' then people can at least see what Christians think about the issues of the day and say 'Well, to go there is to make *'this'* kind of a difference. People know that we want to support the community by offering our spaces for the kitchen and garden. People who connect with us know that we are 'for' refugees and their humane treatment.

There are lots of ways that Christians as individuals exercise their

Christian life through other organisations. I remember one person's saying to me 'I am in Rotary because I want to stop malaria. The Church can not do that.' This is true. It is good that that person makes their contribution through Rotary. But this does not take away the need for the Church to have its own corporate profile, or to identify what Christians are doing. It would be good, for example, to take a photo of the Church congregation to show how Christians are involved in different organisations.

Step two is to think about ways in which we can invite people who have enjoyed our 'signs' or 'presence' in one way, to take the next step for them. This is why I put advertisements in the paper each year, and why I have enquiry. This is why we will be conducting an 'Alpha' course next year.

The other event that caused me to think in the last little while has to do with the overall decline of the Church. This includes places that are successful on the surface. People in the 'West' overall are not as interested in Christianity as they were. Part of this problem is the problem of 'context' which I reflected on a couple of weeks ago. When the supports of the society are going, then the 'social' aspects of being Christian go too. When the Church, like the Anglican Church, is used to being 'societies Church' then it will suffer most when society departs. But the question is: 'Has *God* depart-

ed?' Has the Glory left the 'temple'? This is what Jeremiah thought, so that anyone who defended Jerusalem, was in fact fighting against God. Are we doing that? Should I shut up shop and say 'Well, you should all go to Hillsong now. That is where the glory appears to be.' The answer to this question has to remain open, because we don't know what God has in mind. We do know that God loves us. We do know that when we live Eucharistically' that is: in awe at God's presence, in confession of our sins, in attentiveness to God's Word, in prayer for the world, in peace with one another, and together with God at the heavenly banquet (welcome table) God has promised that we participate in God's own life. I am reminded here of a quote from a book written by one of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's students. He writes "Bonhoeffer could have easily uncovered and unpacked all the faults of the Church and her lamentable role in in the present. But he then would have missed the point. The point is: There are uncriticisable and indestructible realities: God's presence in the Church and as well, god's lordship over the World. Bonhoeffer recognised these points as limits to his thought." So should we perhaps.

Your 'Companion on The Way' and Priest

Paul Dalzell

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