

Commissioning of the Rev'd Chris Bate as Priest in Charge
10 February 2019
C – Epiphany 5

Isa 6.1-8 'Here I am, send me'

Ps 138

1 Cor 15.1-11

Luke 5.1-11 'Put out into the deep ... you will be catching people'

Today is a great day for the Parish of Booval. In one sense we turn a new page, open a new chapter, as we commission Chris to be Priest-in-Charge of the Parish. It's a day on which we look forward to the future with new hope.

Looking forward with hope is important, because for many years now there have been critics not only of the church but of religion in general. They think the church, along with other religions, are irrelevant to society at best, and downright harmful at worst.

Voices like these want to lay at the feet of religion all the woes of the world including war and violence, terrorism and bigotry, prejudice and discrimination. The world would be better off without religion, they say.

In addition to these strong criticisms of the late 20th and 21st centuries, the place of church in society has changed dramatically since the 1950s. In the postwar period a whole lot of new parishes sprang up boosted by the post war baby boom and unprecedented economic prosperity.

Australia was riding high on the sheep's back; wool was a pound a pound; the population grew rapidly with waves of postwar immigration and the spike in the birth-rate; and post-war manufacturing was taking off. The church followed suit.

As new suburbs sprang up in Australian cities, new churches were part and parcel of community life. In fact churches were often the centre of social activities in these communities. In the days before television young adults met at dances in church halls; children came to boys' clubs and girls' clubs and youth groups; and went to church-run camps in the school holidays; tennis and cricket clubs based around churches flourished.

In the days before Sunday night movies on the TV, adults would go back to evensong having been to matins or Communion already in the morning. Clergy had to write two, sometimes three, different sermons every Sunday. Children

of those days recall going to church morning and evening and having Sunday School filling up the time in between.

Confidence and optimism were the order of the day. Many saw this strong growth of new parishes and church facilities going on into the future uninterrupted. The Roman Catholic Church built large convents and monasteries to cope with the booming numbers going into religious orders. And Anglicans thought there should be an Anglican Church within five minutes' walk for everyone. Suburban churches sprang up like mushrooms.

But the rapid growth was interrupted. Within 20-30 years television basically spelt the end for Sunday evening worship. The large Roman Catholic convents emptied, if they ever filled in the first place, and are now only used by Anglicans twice a year for Cursillo weekends. Church based cricket and tennis clubs have all but disappeared, except for a few that hang on to a name but have no real connection to churches. Suburban churches have had to combine to be able to meet rising costs. The scene changed radically in relatively few decades.

The dramatically different place of the church in society, compared with the 1950s has joined forces with the negative and sometimes vitriolic criticisms of the later 20th and early 21st centuries. The combined effect has knocked the wind out of the sails of church people, left us often dispirited, undermined our confidence and left us questioning our purpose and value,

We can very much identify with Simon in today's gospel story: 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.' There is often a tiredness about the church the church today. People have worked hard and long but don't have much success to point to.

But our Lord's instruction to us today is the same instruction he gave to Simon 2,000 years ago: 'Launch out into the deep and let down your nets ...'

You see, our tiredness is not the main thing. Don't let that be your main focus. Our loss of hope isn't the main thing. Don't be distracted by that. Our lack of success isn't the main thing. Don't succumb to that seduction. Our despondency is not what counts.

'If you say so,' says Simon, 'I will put down the nets.'

'If you say so.' The Lord's word is the main thing. When they heard the Lord's word and let down their nets 'they caught so many fish that the nets were beginning to break.'

And then come the words most often repeated in the New Testament, 'Do not be afraid.'

It's easy for us in our day and age to be afraid, to withdraw, to think that nothing is possible, to think that the church's days are numbered, to think even that the Lord has abandoned his church.

Not so. 'Launch out into the deep,' says the Lord.

It's not that we're going to march back to the 1950s. Not at all. Times have changed and won't go back to what they were. In fact they will keep on changing.

But today we hear again our Lord's words of old, his words that have to be heard afresh in every generation, 'Launch out into the deep ... you will be fishers of people.'

The Lord sends us to fish for people. The Latin word for sent is 'missio'. That's where we get our word 'mission' from. God has a mission in the world. And God's way of taking forward God's mission is to create the church and send it out into the deep strengthened by his Holy Spirit.

It's important to get this the right way 'round. You've probably heard it before but it can't be said too often. The church doesn't sit around and dream up its own mission. In fact it's true to say that the Church doesn't have a mission. The mission is God's mission – missio dei – the mission of God.

So it's actually not right to talk about God's Church having a mission in the world. It's truer to say God's mission has a church in the world. The church, you and Fr Chris and I, are called and sent by God into the deep.

We may well feel we're not up to the task. There's nothing new in that. All those centuries ago Isaiah felt the same way when God called him: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips...' Isaiah was convinced there was no way he could possibly carry the Lord's message. But God touches his lips and Isaiah reluctantly says, 'Here I am, send me.'

In our generation we're in the same boat, so to speak. The Lord entrusts us with his message. And St Paul makes very plain what that message is in today's epistle reading: 'the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which you also stand, through which also you are being saved ... that Christ died for our sins ... and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day ...'

This resurrection story has given new life and hope to communities for two thousand years. And it continues to break out in unexpected ways in unexpected places as God surprises us all with the people he catches.

It is true that Fr Chris, as Priest-in-Charge of this parish, has special and particular responsibilities. His job is to be your shepherd: to care for you, protect you and guide you. Fr Chris is to remind you whose you are and who you are, as the ones Christ has chosen and sent. He is to remind you of the tasks Christ has sent you to do. His job is to teach you all that Jesus taught, to help you find the resources and to learn the skills and find the ways to be the people Christ has called you to be. And your job is to get on with that work and invite and welcome others to join you in taking God's mission forward.

It's actually not rocket science. Yes, it will involve planning and coordination and cooperation. But, as Jack Seymour says in a recent book:

'Too often I fear denominations, particularly mainline denominations, are caught in the research mode, seeking to find out how to grow the denomination and make it effective again. Study after study is repeated with list after list defined of renewing strategies. We already know what makes a congregation vital – it is changed lives. It is places where new life is present [in the midst of] brokenness , ... where grace offers new chances, where healing occurs, where communities are reborn and reshaped. Church growth is not the issue; rather, growth in faith is. The task is not competition for market share; it is renewal by the spirit. It is transformation. It is [the] birth of communities of redemption. (Seymour, 2014, 84).

Today we look to the future and open a new chapter in the life of this community of redemption. And it is a wonderful, wonderful thing.

Launch out into the deep together. Tell the resurrection story. Let others see your transformed lives and your love for one another and for them. Then

The oppressed will hear good news,
the brokenhearted will be healed,
prisoners will be set free,
and those who mourn will be filled with gladness.

This is why you have been called and sent and launched into the deep.

May God bless all your efforts in Christ's name. Amen