

Reflection for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

Following on from the Bishop's Pastoral Letter last weekend our readings today offer some useful insights into addressing the challenges which we in catholic Halifax, and the church in general, have to face at this time.

In our second reading St Peter in his letter to the Christians scattered around the mediterranean coast said, *"they like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house"*. Last weekend in his letter Bishop Marcus wrote, "a church is never merely a building; it is hallowed by generations of prayer, sacrifice, and quiet fidelity. Yet the life of the Church as the Body of Christ does not rest ultimately in bricks and stone, but in the living faith of her people and in the abiding presence of Christ in the Most Holy Eucharist." The early church to whom St Peter wrote travelled light, meeting in each other's houses or communal spaces. In times of persecution they were not allowed to practise their faith freely or have any visible signs of their very existence. It wasn't until the fourth century and the conversion of the emperor Constantine that physical church buildings started to appear. The church was missionary and outward-looking, able to adapt to changing circumstances. How things have changed since the fourth century! In Halifax we are sustaining a great many buildings, and not just churches, disproportionate to the regular number of worshippers and swallowing up a great deal of our time and resources. One of our headline figures in Halifax is that on a typical weekend seven hundred people attend one of seven Masses held in five church buildings.

On the second Sunday of Easter, we heard that *"all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need."*¹ One of their commendable projects was to care for the elderly widows with no-one to support them. Unfortunately, things quickly fell apart as we heard in our first reading. There we learnt that Greek widows felt that favouritism was being shown to the Jewish widows *"in the daily distribution."* It became a big problem taking up swathes of the apostles' time because we hear them say, *"it is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables"* and so the order of deacons was established. In many ways history is repeating itself as fewer priests take on the burden of administrating more parishes and acting as caretaker-in-chief to more properties.

As we embark on our consultation it is time for us to step back and take stock to ensure we remain a missionary, outward looking church that travels light in this world. Our next Open Parish Meetings take place in two to three weeks' time when this will figure in the discussion. The next few months should provide us with an opportunity to discuss these things as a parish before joining together with others in the town to discern the future. I invite everyone to come and take part in the conversation.

¹ Acts 2: 44-45