

# Where Our Parish Is & Where It Should Go

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[ 0 : 00 ] My personal feelings about this parish at the moment are that it's like a heavyweight boxer in the beginning of the 15th round, ahead on points, but in very great danger of being knocked out.

And that, I think, is the way that evil works. And so it's good that we come to this season of Lent in order that we may try and put our lives in order before God, individually and as a congregation.

So in order to do that, I want you to look at that passage of Scripture, which was just read for us, and to read it again. And it's 1 Peter 1.

It's on page 216 at the back of your pew Bible. And it's Peter's introduction to his first letter.

And he writes in the first two verses, are you ready? Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the exiles of the dispersion, in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia, chosen and destined by God the Father, and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ, and for sprinkling with his blood.

[ 1 : 30 ] May grace and peace be multiplied to you. The thing that I'm feeling very much is that God has wonderfully blessed us as a congregation.

Now, I know that there are some in the congregation who may feel it in a personal way. They're not in a state of particular blessedness. But as a congregation, God has blessed us.

I think the time of your life with John Chapman was for many, indeed, a time in their lives, a very important time in their lives, in which the clear presentation of Jesus Christ was put to us, and a decision asked for as to where we stand with respect to him.

Very important. And it was good, because many people were able to take part and make that an important time in their lives. 1989 ended with us with a balanced budget, which was a great delight after having struggled through the last few months with the prospect that it would never happen.

During 1989, there was a major overhaul of our music program. Now, our music program still suffers slightly from the fact that there is morning and there is evening.

[ 2 : 56 ] And there's a certain tension between who's right. And the morning is going to take over the evening, or the evening is going to take over the morning, except for the presence of this new committee, which is going to act as an arbitrator and try and keep things in balance between the two.

But the music program has prospered very much, I think, in that way. Jim Packer made a late December declaration to us, which I think could be, in a sense, an opening round of a salvo, which could change the whole, which might mark the changing of the whole attitude towards mission in our parish, in our diocese, and in the church nationally, all of which needs to be badly overhauled. There's a downtown ministry that we're involved in as a parish, and it's been a very exciting thing this year at Wednesdays at the cathedral.

The Barnabas group that are going to hold the epilogue service and their ministry of prayer and healing have become an important addition to the life of this parish. The library, tapes, and book sales have been a very important part of our ongoing ministry.

The complete overhaul of the church committees and the whole structure of decision-making in the parish has been a major undertaking in the past year, and it's going to try its wings shortly to see whether it flies or not, but it's been an important change.

[ 4 : 45 ] A great growth in the children's ministry, and yet there's a great way to go there as well. The starting of an ESL program, which I think is far more effective than most of you are aware, the growth in the evening service is a big responsibility and has been very encouraging to those who've watched it.

The proposal for the restoration of the church and the renewal of the church hall and the raising of the \$1,200,000 to do it is a major undertaking, as well as God has very much blessed our Parksville weekends, not least last weekend, the work and ministry of the food bank, the amazing Christmas

cruise of the Monday Church Club, but there's just an endless series of things that go on which you can't help but feel that God has blessed this parish in quite extraordinary ways.

But then I mentioned to you that the idea of raising \$1,200,000, very often, or I mean at least quite often, people come to the church office, some indigent fellow, and says, I need \$100 to get to Edmonton.

Well, if he wanted me just to pray a blessing on him as he traveled to Edmonton, that would be one thing, but if he wants \$100 from us to get him there, that's another thing.

And so I generally catechize him. I ask him where his unemployment insurance is. I ask him when he last had a job. I ask him if he's been to welfare. I ask him where he slept last night. I ask him what he's going to do when he gets to Edmonton, and all those kinds of things.

[ 6 : 32 ] I just really give him the third degree because he's asking for money, and when you're asking for money, you deserve the third degree. And I make him explain the whole of his life pretty well from the day of his birth till the moment he's stepped into my office and really give him the works.

Well, as a parish, we're asking for some money now, and we're getting the works. People want to know why, where, when, how, who, and under what circumstances and by what right and why haven't we handled things differently and why don't we do this differently and so on.

And so we're having done to us what I do to lots of people, so I feel a rich sense of deserving as that particular crisis comes to our parish and everybody wants answers to that question.

Well, let's face some of the questions for us as a parish. And I was given some help from an article, how do we evaluate, in fact, how the parish is getting on?

My wife continues to warn me that the purpose of the parish is to grow and not just to grow fat.

[ 7 : 45 ] And that's, you know, that's quite a discerning statement, and I take it very seriously, that we do need to grow. And what are the signs of a growing parish?

Well, these are the signs from an article I read this week. Increased biblical literacy, at least people can find their way around the Bible. Small groups that people are involved in where covenants are made, prayer is contextualized.

In other words, instead of general prayers, we're praying for specific people and specific circumstances. Love is learned because one of the difficult things about all small groups is getting to put up with the other people that are in them.

And there's no way out of that. You simply have to go through with it. And you learn love in doing that. And scripture becomes a way of thinking, a way of talking, a way of reasoning.

So small groups are a very important part, and the prosperity of them is a measure of the prosperity of the parish. Worship and the offering of thanks and praise, the hearing of scriptures, is a very important part of the whole life of the parish.

[ 9 : 02 ] Mutual pastoral care and concern, people taking care of one another prayerfully and thoughtfully and reaching out to one another. What we are to look for, this article said, in which I find very helpful in the life of the parish, is to look for gradual rather than spectacular change in people.

We would prefer, I suppose, spectacular change in which people are radically different this week than they were next week. The danger, of course, with that is that they will be radically different in the other direction next week than they were this week.

And so the thing you look for is gradual rather than spectacular change in people over the weeks and months and years as time goes by. Very important to have, in a healthy parish, mutual accountability.

You know, somewhere where you can prayerfully ask somebody, how are you getting along with your wife? And how are you getting along with your husband? And how are you getting along with your kids?

And what are you doing with all your money? And how are you handling your job? All those kinds of things where we become, on a voluntary basis, mutually accountable to one another.

[ 10 : 20 ] Unthinkable, though that may be. It is a sign, I think, of spiritual health. Taking part in spiritual retreats and sabbaticals is very important.

That as individuals, we're doing that and as a congregation, we're doing that. Finding time to get hold of the reality of our faith. Sharing our faith, one with another, in sharing the gospel with one another.

A deepened and deepening sense of the stewardship of all we have that we're accountable for that. And prayer as being not an optional extra, but something that has to be done.

Not that it has to be done, but that it becomes essential. It becomes essential like breathing. And we really need to learn to pray.

Jesus' disciples asked that they might be taught to pray. And so we need to learn to pray. And if you're a person who's got past the first two or three score years of your life and have never yet learned, you're probably in the same boat as everybody else.

[ 11 : 40 ] And so we all very much need to learn to pray. And the only way you can learn to pray, as far as I know, is by praying. Being in the place where people pray and praying with them.

that's why you have a little card in your bulletin today to ask you to come to the Lenten services and maybe learn to pray through Lent in those services.

And so those are the signs of health in a parish, and you can take them in whatever way you like and look at them and see where you fit in and see where we are as a parish.

Now, you may think we've strayed a long way from 1 Peter 1, 1 and 2, but we're back there right now. And what I've done with 1 Peter 1, 1 and 2 is to rewrite it as to us as a congregation rather than to the people to whom Peter wrote it.

You see, Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the exiles of the dispersion of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, and so on. All those things. Look at that carefully, you see.

[ 12 : 48 ] And as you look at it, listen while I read to you a paraphrase of it which might be addressed to us. Peter, representing the apostolic faith of the New Testament in the person of Jesus Christ to the congregation of St. John's, gathered from different lands, different races, different denominations, different parts of a huge country and scattered throughout this city in schools, courtrooms, hospitals, stock exchanges, offices, banks, industries, places of commerce, clubs, sporting sports, centers of healing and teaching and learning.

There you are, you see. You're gathered together as a congregation, but you're scattered throughout the city in tiny minority situations most of the time. Then it goes on.

You are individually and collectively, and it may be to your great surprise, a chosen people. You're here not because you have chosen to follow Jesus Christ, but because God has chosen you to follow Jesus Christ.

And it's wonderfully helpful if you know that that's why you're here, because your choice may change before next Sunday, but his won't. And he has chosen you to be here.

So you are individually and collectively a chosen people for whom God the Father has a very special purpose to accomplish in and through you.

[ 14 : 37 ] Us growing fat is not God's purpose. Us working for the kingdom is God's purpose. And God has to work out that purpose through us individually and as a congregation.

It goes on to say, he does this by the work of his Holy Spirit, who teaches you what it means for you and teaches us what it means for us to be obedient to Jesus Christ who is our Lord.

It's the Holy Spirit that teaches us individually and as a group to be obedient to Jesus Christ. And we have to learn that individually and as a group.

God's radical acceptance of us is demonstrated as we share in his body broken for us and his blood shed for us.

So we know he has accepted us. We remind God of his promises to our world and he reminds us of the obedience to which he has called us.

[ 15 : 55 ] And for our enabling he has given us and multiplies to us grace, a constant need that is constantly supplied, and peace, our ultimate goal which in Christ has already been won.

well, that's what that verse says, I think, for us. The sprinkling of the blood which may startle you slightly as I think it's meant to comes from the book of Exodus where Moses took the sacrificial animal and killed it.

he read to the people from the scriptures and as he read to them from the scriptures God's love for the people was revealed and the pattern of the people's response and obedience to God was laid down.

And then both parties to the covenant having understood what it is, God's purpose and our response, then the blood of the animal was taken and sprinkled on the book and on the people as a sign that both parties were under the covenant.

And, of course, that's what happens in our communion. You've got to have the proclamation of the word of God to people's hearts and then the sprinkling of the blood as it were in the Holy Communion so that you be assured of God's promises to you and you be clear about the nature of your response to him.

[ 17 : 48 ] And that's how Peter begins his letter. And we're going to go on with this letter through the month, through the season of Lent this year. Go on with the first chapter of it only.

As I conclude, I want you to take part in a little catechizing, and it's on page 554. And this may be very old-fashioned, but there are some real truths here, which as you take them and think about them and contemplate them, they may prove to be helpful to you.

Towards the bottom of page 554, I'll ask the questions and you give me the answers, will you?

What is your work as a lay member of the Church of God?

My heart is worship, laborers, and thousands, according to the gifts of grace God has given me, and to pray, work, and give for the spread of his kingdom.

Why ought you to read God's holy word, the Bible? God is to tell us how God has made himself over to man, and how we may come to know him, and find salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of his Church.

[ 19 : 15 ] What does the Church teach about the Bible? The Bible records the word of God as it was given to Israel, and to his Church, at sundry times, and divers matters.

Nothing may be taught in the Church as necessary to man to salvation, unless it be included and proved there from. Where, then, is the word of God to be found in all its fullness?

Jesus Christ, his only Son, who has made man for us and for our salvation. What is the vocation of a Christian in this world? To follow Christ, and bear witness to him, to fight the good, fight of faith, and the radical freedom which belongs to us in Christ, it's dangerous to read this next passage, lest we all become very legalistic.

And, because I consider it very unlikely we will do that, I will go ahead and read it, that we will take this and interpret it in the terms of our own life.

Every Christian man or woman should, from time to time, frame for himself or herself a rule of life in accordance with the precepts of the gospel and the faith and order of the church, wherein he may consider the following, the regularity of his attendance at public worship and especially at the Holy Communion, the practice of private prayer, Bible reading, and self-discipline, bringing the teaching and example of Christ into his everyday life, the boldness of his spoken witness to his faith in Christ, his personal service to the church and the community, the offering of money according to his means for the support of the work of the church at home and overseas.

[ 21 : 13 ] So may God grant to us as a congregation that as we begin this Lenten season there be a time for re-evaluation and a time for us all to synchronize our watches with God's time for us and to be there in a place of obedience to which God calls us.

Amen. Amen. Amen.