

February 7th 2021 – Epiphany V Is 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39

Let's go out of Capernaum

Excuse me, you are sitting on my seat.

It was a special time. Basel was hosting the annual Taizé youth meeting over New Year's Eve. For a week, 17000 young Christians from 45 countries lived, prayed and sang in Basel. The city was full of Taizé hymns, at every corner of the city you could hear groups chanting. The churches were completely overfull these days. There were daily prayers in all Basel churches and every evening, all came together to worship in the football stadium.

On a Sunday, in one of the parishes I occasionally attended, the church was completely packed. What a joy!

10 minutes before 10, an elderly lady walked in, straight to the third row and looked disapprovingly at the person who was sitting there. "Excuse me," she said, "you are sitting on my seat."

She would be one who would join the choir of complaints at every vestry that the church does not have enough young people. This is not to blame this particular person. This is not for us to point a finger at someone we might know, who would have acted similarly. This is a finger pointed at all of us, at church and all who see themselves as part of it.

Church has a tendency to put a sign out "All Welcome", but not to think about what a culture of true welcome could look like. "All welcome, but don't change something in the way it is and, of course, don't sit on my seat."

The good news is, I think St. Clement's is doing really well with this, but being part of church, we have to remain alert.

The joy of faith is something to share, something that multiplies when shared. The Gospel joy ends for many at the church door or after coffee hour the latest. The church is our Capernaum. Within its boundaries, we want to keep this Jesus, best locked in, available when we need him.

But Jesus wanted to move on. The Gospel tells us that all in the town came and they brought *all* the sick. He healed *many*, not all. They wanted him to stay, wanted him for themselves, wanted him as healer in residence.

Jesus wanted to share the Good News with as many as possible. He needed to move on. That was hard for the people in Capernaum, but Jesus knew that the time of his ministry was limited.

It is easy for a church to remain inward-centered; trying to keep the Jesus within. I am always reminded of that when I go to Deep Cove. When were you last in Deep Cove and remembered that that is part of our parish? We are so lucky to have Peggy with her heart for the wider community and her awareness for those who live outside of Capernaum. If you haven't looked at the new magazine she and Maddy created for the wider community, please do. It is on our homepage.

Now, the thing is that it has always been easy to preach the importance of sharing our joy, of living our faith outward facing in a generous manner and being truly welcoming within our church walls, but it has always been difficult. Right now, it really is extremely difficult with the strict regulations.

Neither the being truly welcoming in church (and not chasing people from your seat), nor the being outward facing as church are easy in this pandemic, when in-person contact is not possible.

Personal relationships are the main pillar of sharing good news. Being there for others is the most precious way in which our call to service can translate into outward-facing action.

Luckily, most churches have recognized that mission and evangelizing are no longer (and should never have been) done by talking people into faith, but by engaging people's interest in that faith that gives the believers joy and hope, that motivates them for acts of voluntary servitude, the faith that teaches the believers to act gracefully with others and with themselves and their own mistakes.

Even now, there are ways to share hope and joy, to be of service for the wider community and the creativity some have shown is simply amazing. But closed church doors, no pastoral visits at home, rarely visits to hospitals...

How to be church in a time of pandemic?

Jesus didn't heal them all. That is sad but it helps me to deal with this situation. We, as church, cannot get it all right. We try to, other churches try differently and I would be careful to shame them. We are all walking in unknown territories and we will all have regrets once this pandemic is over and we get the full picture. Once we know the toll this pandemic has taken in numbers of lives and on the mental health of the rest.

We are taking new paths from Capernaum to other villages in Galilee. The most important thing is that we don't only stay in Capernaum, looking at ourselves.

The other thing we can try is to share the confidence in God's faithfulness and the hope we get from faith abundantly with those around us, even if it is only from a distance or virtually.

Our confidence is in God, the God who—as Isaiah said—

is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

God does not faint or grow weary.

God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.

Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;

but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,

they shall mount up with wings like eagles,

they shall run and not be weary,

they shall walk and not faint.

(Is 40:28b-31)