

*"...for my house will be called **a house of prayer** for **all** the peoples."* I wonder what comes to mind when you reflect on these words from our first reading – God's vision for **us**, this faith community, and our entire **parish**? Each person's response to that question depends upon how we understand our purpose and reason for existing – both as individual Christians **and** as a faith community within a parish. Every now and then, people sidle up to me before or after Mass asking if I can make our church quieter so that they can pray better. Each time that happens, I feel the weight of the other people who've asked me the same thing. But then I think and pray about God's vision for the place in which we gather: *"I will make them joyful in my house of prayer... [a place] for all peoples."* There's sometimes a tension between what we grew up with and/or want, and what we read in the Bible. If we are to continue the journey of becoming a **place** where people feel comfortable to **not just visit**, but who find a joyful **home**, then what are our growth areas? I'd like to propose three.

The **first** growth area is how we understand our participation in the Mass itself. Up until the mid-twentieth century, most Catholics went to Mass every weekend, and because of this cultural phenomenon, Mass became legalistic and sometimes even transactional. You knew how late you could get to Mass, for example, and it still be valid. If you arrived after the Offertory, your Sunday obligation was not satisfied, and you'd have to go to Mass again. Similarly with fasting. If even a drop of rain water touched your lips in the morning on the way to Mass, your fast would be destroyed and you couldn't receive Eucharist. Following the Second

Vatican Council, though, the emphasis shifted to full, conscious and active participation in the liturgy as a unified whole - meaning that **how** we gather as a family **before** Mass start really matters. Joyful greetings, human contact, gift of self to others are all part of Mass. Too often, people come to Mass **either** **habitually late** **or** **early** to use it as their personal private prayer time. But while preparing our hearts to celebrate Mass is important, we also need to take the opportunity to practice loving others before Mass starts.

The **second** growth area for becoming a joyful house **for all peoples** is understanding our **purpose** and **reason for existence** as a faith community. In a 1975 apostolic exhortation, St Pope Paul VI said that *"the church exists to evangelise"* – that it's *"her deepest identity."* Moving **away** from a culture of obligation where, in a *de facto* sense, the church exists to meet my needs, our primary reason for existence as a faith community is two-fold: be a place of nourishment and encounter through the worship of Jesus **and** to share the Good News: that Jesus is risen, real and present in our lives in such a way that others become curious about Him. This is the essence of **evangelisation** - the process by which **we** come to **know** – not just faithfully believe – but **know** that Jesus is risen, real and actively present in our lives - to the point we realise that what we've received is given to share with the poor: those who do not yet know Jesus.

The final growth area is our **capacity** to **recognise** what we **have** received so that we can **share** it with others. One of the interesting outcomes of the destruction and exile of Jerusalem in 587 BCE and the subsequent return 50 years later - which is where our first

reading picks up – was the growing realisation among the Jews that they'd been chosen to bring God's love and healing, not only to their **own** people, but to **all the people**. Recognising and sharing what we have received with others depends on three things. Identifying a **pivotal moment** when our lives have been transformed by God; reflecting on what life was like **before** that pivotal moment; and then what life was life **afterward**. The Canaanite woman's encounter with Jesus - as with every encounter - carries all three elements: her daughter's torment, her interaction with Jesus, and her life afterward. It became the story that she shared.

Friends, we, as a parish, are well on the way to becoming a **vibrant community** – as in the first part of our Mission. But our capacity **to actively accompany people to encounter Jesus** depends upon our growth in becoming a **joyful house of prayer** for **all the people** in this geographic community. A community in which we become missionary disciples who **gather** to celebrate Mass every week in whole-hearted worship, who recognise our purpose to share God's active love in our lives, and who are sent, like Paul, to do just that: sharing our story with those who need hope. May our hearts be filled so that they overflow with God's love for all people as we celebrate this Eucharist. Amen.