

In 2005, I deployed to Afghanistan for 6 months with the New Zealand Army. Our camp of 125 soldiers was in the tail end of the Himalayas, about 2,500 meters above sea level. At the entrance to the camp was an elevated hut with a machine gun overlooking the entire approach to the camp. About twice a week, I was rostered to do sentry for two hours in the middle of the night. It was a significant responsibility because the safety of everyone else asleep depended upon the sentry being alert to danger. In an army, everyone gets appointed to sentry duty so as to share the responsibility, but in faith communities, we often appoint ourselves – and this creates interpersonal problems because **a.** we don't like being held accountable for our behaviour, and **b.** while it's hard admitting we're wrong, it's sometimes even harder to bite our tongues when we want to correct someone.

In the first reading, God appoints Ezekiel as **sentry** to the House of Israel to share the words from God's mouth. Notice that Ezekiel did not appoint himself, nor did he act out of frustration, assumptions, or misunderstandings born of anger or anxiety. His task was to share **God's word**.

How do we do that with each other when the heat rises and we lose our capacity to think objectively? It's important that we break this topic open because in a growing parish like ours – with lay people exercising delegated responsibility and authority – disagreements are going to happen. To help unlock this, let's go back to what we asked for in our opening prayer:

*“O God, look graciously on us who believe in Christ, that we may **receive true freedom and an everlasting inheritance.**”*

Firstly, can we all agree that there is often a **big gap** between where we might be as people who believe – **or** who are **trying** to believe that Jesus is risen and present in our midst by his Holy Spirit – and the **true freedom** and **everlasting inheritance** we prayed to receive? Secondly, what are these things? Because they’re not just something to hope for when we die, but gifts from God **for this life.**

True freedom and everlasting inheritance are given when a person becomes **secure** in the **knowledge** that they are loved unconditionally by God. An **insecure** person reacts to, and often blames, the world and others around them, while a more **secure** or **free** person has a greater capacity to consciously choose how they act **rather than react.** I can vividly remember times in my life when I didn’t have the capacity to remain calm when the heat rose in a difficult conversation. My mind turned to mud, I couldn’t think clearly, and I’d react with statements such as, “You **always** do this” or “You **never** do that.” I didn’t have the capacity to remain calm and objective because I’d not yet received the true freedom which empowered me to choose love.

How is this freedom given, then? Well, for me, it certainly wasn’t a once-and-done. Reflecting on the last four years of leading this parish, I’ve noticed that through my encounter experiences – those gift moments in prayer when I’ve experienced God’s love, joy or peace – the result has been growth in freedom and, therefore, a

growing capacity to approach difficult conversations with more ***empathy, love*** and ***objectivity***.

This is challenging stuff because it goes to the heart of parish community life. When we have a disagreement, the Christian response is not to avoid the person or ***triangulate*** by talking about them to someone else. It is to pray for the grace to love them, give them the benefit of the doubt, and, when necessary, speak the truth in love. St Ignatius of Loyola famously said that “every good Christian ought to be more ready to give a favourable interpretation to another’s statement than to condemn it.” (CCC2478)

That’s what it means to be a sentry in the House of God. **A sentry is not there to police everyone else. A sentry is there to watch, to listen, and, when necessary, to speak a word that protects the community.** And you can only do that well when you are secure enough in God’s love that you don’t need to win, prove yourself right, or make someone else wrong.

At the end of the day, we are all just blind beggars helping other blind beggars find the bread. **Jesus didn’t die for the best version of you or me. He died for the worst version. And if that is how Jesus loves us, then that is how we ought to love one another. Amen.**