

WHAT ARE WE SELLING?



1 Peter 4:12 "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed."

Many people these days keep asking me when are things going to back to 'normal'. When can we go to return to church again, to visit with our friends; when will we receive Communion again? Will we ever shake hands again? Hug one another again? Things are not as they once were, many observe, and they are right, because we have all been changed by this pandemic. Our values are changing, as we realize more and more, for example, which workers are really essential and which are not, and what is safe and what is not.

I suspect that we are never really going back to how things were before. One always moves forward in time, not backwards, forward towards a 'new' normal. But what will the 'new' normal look like? The future is always a little uncertain, but when some hear descriptions of what church may look like in the days ahead, with social distancing in the pews, with no physical contact, when they hear that they will have to wear masks in church and that there may well be no congregational singing for the next year or so, they become discouraged and disheartened. The future sometimes seems very dark and foreboding, like some kind of fiery ordeal. Some fear that too many things are changing in our society, and changing too fast, and that the Church is being hurt by all of this, and may not even survive, or else it will just become unrecognizable.

So let's pause for a moment, and look back at earlier changes in our lives for some guidance. In September of 1973, I packed up all my worldly possessions into a 1969 Dodge Polara, and drove off to my first year at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. I was young and more foolish in those days, so much so that I had packed my beloved music collection in the back window of my car, where the hot Texas sun warped all of my vinyl records along the way. After I recovered from this devastating loss, I had a decision to make, whether I was going to buy new copies of my favorite records, or whether to invest in those

newfangled 8-track tapes that were becoming more and more popular, because unlike vinyl records they do not warp in the Texas sun! So I decided to convert my small record collection into 8-tracks. Then in the 1980's I had to slowly convert my 8-track collection into cassettes, which were so much more portable, and fit neatly into my Walkman or my boom box at the beach. Then in the 1990's, I found myself slowly burning my cassettes onto CDs, which didn't have tape that got all tangled up in your machine after excessive use, and had higher fidelity. Then along came Napster and audio files and iTunes, so that nowadays the only music I ever listen to is on my phone or computer, while my old CD's and cassettes and 8-tracks gather dust down in the basement!

The world is constantly changing, and it is hard to keep up sometimes with all the rapid developments in our lives! Change can be frightening at times, or simply disconcerting. But change can also be exhilarating. For each of these new advances makes life more interesting in some way, and more productive somehow! And so, as we all know, the Christian Church is also constantly changing, especially in this current time of pandemic, and those changes can also be frightening or simply disheartening, or exciting. Still sadly there are many Christians who resist **any** kind of change and who are fiercely loyal to the good ole days, to the way things always were and always should be, where every

church was more or less the same, when words like Presbyterian or Episcopal or Roman Catholic meant something specific, it was a brand, and you knew what you were going to get --- when the church's liturgy was as predictable as a McDonald's cheeseburger, basically the same wherever you went. That is the advantage of franchises. You know what you are getting. Uniformity helped McDonald's expand to serve billions and billions of hamburgers around the globe.

And uniformity sold religions as well! So nowadays in this rapidly changing world of ours, many Christians expect predictability when they come to church. Truth is unchanging, as they say. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. For many, many centuries the Catholic Mass was exactly the same all over the world, wherever you went, and whoever you were! In the same language even, Latin, though few worshippers anywhere understood it, still it was comforting in its uniformity and predictability, but perhaps also a little boring. Others preferred the reassurance of some other brand of church, like a refined and proper Anglican liturgy perhaps, or the fiery theatrics of a Southern Baptist preacher or the charismatic spirit of the Pentecostals, or whatever denomination one prefers. We expect uniformity and consistency when we go to our Church.

But the times they are a changing, sang Bob Dylan in 1964. There is no brand loyal among the younger generations of churchgoers. And some new church leaders are questioning what kind of business are we really in. What exactly are we selling here? What specifically is our product or our brand? What are we really meant to be up to here? --- Are we selling vinyl records, or are we in an ever-changing music industry? The same questions apply to other enterprises as well. Are we selling film and cameras here, or are we interested in photography? Some of you may remember the sermon I preached about the demise of the Polaroid Company that was way too focused on their product, their famous Polaroid Instant Land Camera, and thus they got left behind in the photography business that soon went digital -- Who could have imagined twenty years ago that we would be listening to our music or taking most of our photos with our cell phones!

So many religious leaders are saying that beneath our ancient traditions and our established and beloved practices and rituals, is something deeper, running like a current beneath the visible surface, pulsing like a heartbeat . . . a mission, a calling, an adventure, a challenge, an opportunity that lies behind everything we do! And that that's what we are really about as Christians! That mission! --- So what is the Mission of the Church, we are asked that question in the Catechism, page

855 BCP. I presume you all remember the answer? The Mission of the Church is the reconciliation of all people to each other and to God, through Christ Jesus our Lord. And to pursue that calling is what really matters most to us as Christians, even if that means abandoning or recycling some of our ancient traditions and revolutionizing some of our cherished practices, even if we have to trade in our beloved vinyl records or 8-tracks, because we are not in the business of selling records, and we can't get fixated on the product or the brand. We must stay focused on the mission.

There are new possibilities out there for the Christians, especially now because of this pandemic. More people are viewing our worship online than ever attended our services here in person. There are now more participants in our classes and groups on the web than when they were held in the Parish Hall. There are new and exciting questions being asked about how are we to be the Church at this time. New creativity for doing what we have always done, but just in new ways. Still, many are anxious about what is happening, and they want their church to be the one place in the world where everything stays exactly the same! They want to go back to what they perceive as 'normal.' They don't realize that what they're asking for is not a church, but a museum, or maybe a cemetery.

So what are we really selling here? What is our mission? Is it cassettes or music? Cameras or photography? For most of us, the mission of the church has never really changed. In the words of the Prophet Micah it is to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God. In the words of Jesus from the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, it is to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, comfort the sick and dying. That's what we are about. In the Summary of the Law and Prophets it is simply to love God and our neighbors. New people, new expressions, new activities may arise but the mission hasn't changed. There are megachurches now with giant video screens, or other congregations with rock bands and new age music and dancing in the aisles, or old-fashioned liturgies in Latin with Sung Masses and incense, but the mission that underlies them all hasn't changed. Many of us welcome in the new ideas, because what we really care about is not the format, but our primary vocation as Christians. So we embrace new expressions, like live streaming of services, like ZOOM meetings and gatherings, because all of these together contribute to the vital mission that we hold dear, they contribute in new and expanded ways, appropriate for our time and in this place.

So let us not anxious about the future of the Church, but rather let us be excited by the new possibilities. Yes, it will be different, but the church is always changing. I gave up my 8-

tracks. I am okay with audio files on my phone, because it is the music I love, not the tapes themselves! So that no matter what changes in the days ahead, we will continue to be the church, engaged in the mission and ministry of God's people in our communities and around the world, seeking the reconciliation of all people to each other and to God through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.