

December Reflection

Welcoming parishes: “Enlarge your tents”

Our Diocesan prayer theme this month is that our parishes would seek to be even more welcoming and invitational. It is often this time of year when our parishes will get more visitors than we might normally. This could be former parishioners returning home from working/studying away; those who have not been regular worshippers but feel a pull at Christmas; families connected to our schools; or local people who come seeking a bit of Christmas nostalgia, responding to a feeling this is right to do, or anywhere in between. We may grumble about not being able to find a seat or a parking space, but I always love this. For whatever reason our churches are fuller and enriched by our guests... but wouldn't it be amazing if they weren't just guests? Wouldn't be wonderful if they receive something from their visit that drew them to remain, to come more regularly, to feel at home?

‘Enlarge the place of your tents, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out hold not back, lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes.’ This verse of scripture we are reflecting on this month is taken from Isaiah Chapter 54 verse 2. Most of the book of Isaiah is addressed to God's people in exile. They must have felt that never would the glory days return, never again would they be a free people, never would they be able to live out their religious lives. This may be a feeling common to you and your parish, though we are not in bondage, but we may wonder if ever again our church's will be full? The Israelites (and us too) are reminded that we are a hope filled people, we hear anew the call to be expectant on the Lord. To make room for those who He will send to us and who He calls us to seek. The Lord calls us to hold nothing back, to not be fearful and to lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes.

The cords and stakes are what will hold the tent against storms, they will stop the tent from collapsing. If we are to enlarge the tent this also means we need to lengthen the cords and strengthen the stakes too. Let us then ask what are the stakes and cords of our parish? I would suggest the **prayer life** of the community (Mass, confessions, prayer groups, Bible studies) and **hospitality** (the welcome at Mass, the tea and coffee, groups that serve the needs of the parish and wider community – parent and toddler, bereavement, friendship, youth etc).

IF WE ARE INVITING PEOPLE INTO OUR PARISH, WHAT ARE WE INVITING THEM INTO?

WHAT WILL ENABLE THEM TO ENCOUNTER THE LOVE OF THE LORD?

HOW WILL THEY FEEL IT?

HOW CAN WE ENSURE THESE ASPECTS OF OUR PARISHES HELP KNOW THAT THEY ARE LOVED BY GOD AND WELCOME HERE?

