

Fr Alan's Reflection

CONVERSION

As I mentioned last week I, along with some members of the Parish Community, have been undergoing training in how to facilitate sessions in the Alpha Programme. The sessions are of 75 minutes duration (via zoom). The sessions consist of an ice breaker, prayer, video and discussion. The videos tell stories of people who have experienced conversion in their lives.

This Sunday's Gospel is all about conversion. We are urged to prepare a way for the Lord and to make his paths straight. It is a call to follow Christ in a radical way in all circumstances. We are called to repent, to see our lives differently.

In the First Reading the prophet Isaiah speaks to his people at a time when their experience in exile resulting from the Babylonian captivity was about to end. At the beginning of Mark's Gospel this Sunday these words from Isaiah are taken but applied in a different context. In this case God will come to rescue them not from a physical exile but rather a spiritual one caused by sin.

When hearing the stories of other people's conversion experiences, it can be hard to relate to particularly if it is something, we have not experienced ourselves. Also, people can experience it differently. For some people it can happen by a single event. For other people the experience can be gradual. When I first read biographies about the life of St Vincent de Paul, I thought that his conversion experience was a once off encounter. However, after reading more recent biographies on his life I am now convinced that his conversion was gradual through encountering the poor people of his time.

Whether we have yet to experience conversion or can relate to it either as a once-off encounter or gradual experience, the Gospel calls us to be open to the possibility that it can occur in our lives. Recognizing that all things happen in God's time, I believe there are a few things we can do to help ourselves. Firstly, the Christmas Carol "Joy to the World" contains the following words, 'let every heart prepare him room.' Do we create a space for God in our lives? Do we spend time with God in prayer? Read scripture? Commit to attending Mass now it is possible again? Secondly, preparing the way for the Lord is not so much about what we are prepared to give up but rather what we are prepared to take on. Is there a commitment I can take on that would benefit someone or that would assist my community? Thirdly, right at the beginning this week's Gospel speaks about the Good News of Jesus Christ. Are we good news for

other people? Do we live hope filled lives amidst daily struggles? Fourthly, St Paul speaks about living lives without spot or stain whilst waiting for the second coming of Christ. One way of applying these words is spending a few moments in silence at the end of our day going back over the course of that day. Who did I encounter? Did I respond well to them or not? If I experienced a setback in my day, did I respond gracefully or not?

Alpha invites all who participate to experience the love that God has for them. 'A voice cries out in the wilderness: Prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight, make his paths straight.' We are called to encounter the Lord in a realistic way. Conversion is about having hope that the Lord will change our lives for the better. Let every heart prepare him room.