

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dear Parishioners,

We are used by now to seeing prominently posted at the entrance of every institution – hospital, college, school or local authority office – a mission statement. The exercise is fundamental to the politically correct culture of our age. But it is no mere token gesture to the sensitivities of an increasingly cosmopolitan and culturally diverse society within which we are called to live in constructive harmony. It acknowledges that an institution has a vocation, a calling and a specific role to play in society. Reflection on the statement helps those who work within the institution to define themselves as a team, to appreciate the needs of their target client group, and to express in language that will be understood by all who cross the threshold of their institution what their character and purpose are.

A Catholic school, for example, is challenged to define its mission in terms of an exclusive embrace of all pupils/students regardless of cultural or social background, to be precise about the service it seeks to render its pupils and their parents, and to be quite specific that the ideals they propound are firmly rooted in and inspired by the Gospel message. An NHS hospital will define itself in terms of its outreach, its service to the neighbourhood, its commitment to excellence in terms of the health care provided, even if (from a Catholic point of view) it may be less vague on its mission to protect life from conception to the moment of natural death. A department store, a restaurant or a local authority office may also have a mission statement – commitment to ethically sourced textiles, to organically produced food or to service to all entitled citizens – and the statement helps both those who work for the institution as well as reassuring the clients that it has specific targets and the means to reach them.

Individuals too issue mission statements: MP's, new business managers and, on the day of his induction, there are parish priests who outline their plans and their expectations for their new community as well as how they understand their own priestly calling. In fact, this year the Archbishop has invited the priests of the diocese to tell their own "vocation story" on one of the Sundays of February, and I can imagine many of my confreres will issue or revise a mission statement of their own. Today in the gospel we encounter Jesus in the synagogue of his native town, Nazareth. Today the scroll with the writings of the prophet Isaiah are put before him, but the choice of reading rests with him. His eye alights on the passage where the mission of God's holy one, the promised Messiah, is articulated. Jesus reads those words about "opening the eyes of the blind, setting the captives free" and applies them to himself. He allows Isaiah to define his mission, he allows the promises made from ages past to his chosen people by God to determine his programme and shape his values, and he focuses on developing strategies to put himself at the service of God and his neighbour. Let Jesus' mission statement shape ours too: ours as a parish, ours as individual disciples.

Father Patrick