

There are some experiences in life that stay with you for ever. One for me was a sensitivity training weekend.

It was the late 60s and T groups were all the rage. A "T" group is a form of group training where participants learn about themselves through their interaction with each other. A chap I knew through YAF said he was going and wondered if I would like to attend.

Unsure what to expect I said yes I would go. During the weekend I got to experience community in a way I had never done before and had the opportunity to share things I had never shared with anyone. Others shared things they had never shared before.

It was for me a unique experience. It was life changing and for me it has been the measure for relationships ever since.

Through the epistle readings this week and last week we have been taken with John to the Island of Patmos where he experienced something other. He saw what he believed to be a glimpse of God seated on the throne with the risen ascended Jesus by his side.

He was given a foretaste of the heavenly Jerusalem showered in light by the presence of God surrounded by jewels and sacred symbols. As was noted last week this occurred at a time when being a Christian was dangerous.

John's vision inspired not only him but the whole community. John's foretaste of heaven empowered him and those who were a part of the Christian community to press on in the service of the Lord in the face of adversity, even hostility.

In the gospel story we have Jesus emphasising the importance of living the gospel. The disciples had experienced something that was truly unique; Jesus had gathered them into a community. They shared things with one another and with Jesus. Jesus shared things with them he had not shared with anyone else.

They had become special to Jesus and he had become special to them. But Jesus knew that the time was coming when he would be taken from them and so there were things he wanted to remind them of and things he wanted to leave them with.

Jesus wanted to emphasise that he was a part of the Godhead. It was God's plan that he enter human history as a child and demonstrate God's love for all humanity. He wanted the disciples to know that God's love for humankind would continue even when he was no longer present.

In the time the disciples spent with Jesus they experienced something that was truly amazing. They experienced first-hand what it was like to be in the presence of the living God. And yet Jesus referred to them as friends.

It was a foretaste of what is possible in this life and what can be expected in the next. Perhaps what was so crushing for Judas when greed got the better of him was the realization that he was better than a petty thief and a betrayer.

When the disciples were overcome with fear, when they descended into bickering and division they could look back to their time with Jesus and his teaching and be reminded that they too were better than that.

They were a part of a special group with whom Jesus had chosen to spend time. Share his life.

Hear his story. Jesus gave them specific tasks: love one another, do this in remembrance of me, go into all the world and preach the gospel.

To assist the disciples hold onto this reality the Father sent the Holy Spirit to help clarify Jesus' teaching and remind the disciples of all the things Jesus had "said to" them. His parting gift was the peace that he would leave with them.

Over the past eleven months I have had the opportunity to share in the life of this parish community. For me it has been a special time that will stay with me as the "T" group experience has stayed with me. There have been many highlights.

I will long remember the warmth of your welcome and the willingness with which the various groups go about their tasks. It has been a joy to worship with you and to participate in the Pilgrim course.

I'm very aware, as I'm sure some of you are, of the huge number of hours put in by dozens of people behind the scenes to ensure that our Sunday worship flows smoothly.

It has also been wonderful to have the assistance of the parish clergy team as well as the clergy from North Ipswich and Booval to help maintain the mid-week services, prepare children for baptism, officiate at weddings and funerals and provide pastoral care.

The admin team, the wardens and the parish council have been a pleasure to work with. I have appreciated the opportunity to interact with the ground maintenance crew. Chat with the Variety Market volunteers. Attend the Men's Society breakfasts and MU gatherings, drop in on the Support Centre. Participate in the organ committee's work leading up to the organ

dedication concert and see the army of volunteers involved in the quilt show.

Many of these experiences will remain with me as examples of God's presence in the church. There have been times, as there always are, when we have not been at our best.

It is at those times when the experience of what is possible can sustain us. We can say to ourselves individually and as a community, "I, we are better than this. This is not how God wants me, wants us to be, I know I am and I know that we are better than this."

I trust that you share with me in thinking that we have shared something special together. During these eleven months you have done some significant work:

- ✓ you have looked at what you want to leave in the past,

- ✓ you have attended to the maintenance of your parish buildings and that is an ongoing piece of work,
- ✓ you have kept the parish life ticking along at a good pace,
- ✓ you have engaged in prayer for a new priest
- ✓ you have prayed that the person who will become your priest will be empowered by God,
- ✓ you have engaged in a parish consultation with the Regional Bishop
- ✓ you have thought about what you need to do, to realistically face the future and
- ✓ you have thought about the kind of person you want to lead you there.

I have a sense that the parish of St Paul's Ipswich is stable and productive and that your sense of community strong. There are challenges ahead but I believe you are well placed to address them.

You have begun to think about how you organise yourselves and how to make the best use of your resources. Through the Variety Market, the Quilt Show and numerous other channels you are reaching out to and serving the people of Ipswich.

Your search for a new priest is well underway. In the meantime you will be served by another locum priest in the person of the Reverend Bill Crossman.

Bill is an experienced priest. He has served in the Diocese of North Queensland, the church in Papua New Guinea, and in the parishes of Kingaroy, Caloundra, Texas Inglewood and Bribie Island.

He is well able to assist you to maintain the life of the parish and prepare you for your future. I finish today. Bill will commence Tuesday.

The Book of Revelation tells us that John had an experience on the Island of Patmos that sustained

him and the persecuted Christian community. The disciples had many wonderful experiences with Jesus they were encouraged to draw upon as they engaged in ministry.

Many of us have experienced times where we have experienced God's presence. Such times sustain us as we minister and offer service to others. My time at St Paul's has been such time for me. I trust that it has been beneficial for you as well.

Owen Strong
Locum Priest.