

SERMON FOR SYNOD, FRIDAY NIGHT, 11TH APRIL. Readings – Romans 12:1-2, John 5:17-22.

Forty two years ago, I applied for and was accepted for Volunteer Service Abroad as an adult volunteer in the field of agriculture and was sent to Cheju Island off South Korea to work at the St Isadore Development Association (or Isadore Muk Chang as we called it). The Isadore Muk Chang was then a pig farm with 10,000 pigs with an export market to Japan with some cattle and sheep as well. It was run by a Catholic Columban missionary priest called Father Pat McGlinchey and the whole farm was about 2000 acres or so divided into five blocks.

Cheju Island itself was situated to the south of South Korea, being 60 miles long, east to west, and about 30 miles wide with a volcanic mountain in the centre called Halla San. The population was about 430, 000 people living main around the coast and in some inland villages, the houses of many being rocked walled and grass thatched roofs. Often when going into a village it was like traveling a 1000 years backward in time. Most of the roads were shocking. There was one sealed road that went round the circumference of the island and one going over the mountain from Chuju City, the main centre of the island, to Sogwipo, another major town on the other side of the island. The rest of the roads were either dirt or rocky tracks which made driving difficult. It took over half an hour to travel from the farm to Hallim, our nearest town on the coast, a mere ten kilometers.

The people on the island were, at that time, among the poorest in South Korea. It was claimed that Cheju Island was one of the last Communist strongholds to be taken over during the Korean war and we saw one or two remnants of trenches from that war on one or two places on the Isadore Farm.

Perhaps an over riding feature of that Island which I noticed almost as soon as I arrived was the lack of trees. Prior to the WW2 the Japanese had cut them all down. I arrived there in mid winter and the island was mainly a brown color, the color of the dead grass.

Well I worked there for two and a half years. At the same time as I arrived a shipment of 1100 hereford cattle arrived in Hallim and that set the theme of my work for the whole time I was there; working with cattle. There were enormous difficulties and we dealt with problems not encountered here like the ticks which carried a fatal blood disease called piroplasmiasis causing anemia leading to death, we struggled to have enough feed for the winter and often the cows were not strong enough to deliver their own calves. We had to pull them, out for them. There were a number of volunteers there mainly from Ireland and Australia and we all supported each other. It was also while I was there when I became a Christian through the Catholic Charismatic movement which was occurring amongst the Poor Clare nuns and one of the other volunteers.

I left Cheju Island in mid 1975 and went back home. It was 33 years later, in 2008, when I was invited to go back to Cheju Island for a reunion of the volunteers of the 1970s, so towards end of May, 2008, Christine and I went over there to join up with six other people who had worked there when I was there. Now I knew that things would be different especially after 33 years but nothing prepared me for what I saw in

the first few hours when I arrived. There was now a modern international airport where it was pretty basic when I had lived there. There were sealed six lane highways everywhere with busy traffic and people drove around in private cars when the only cars on the Island had been taxis and there were more people walking riding in carts. The old sealed road around the Island, a very main road back in the 70s, was now just a side road. In fact I took a photo of one of the six lane highways because it was running where formerly there had just been a dirt track between Quang Pyong and Sin Chuk Jang, two of the blocks of land of the Isadore farm.

There are now theme parks on the Island, a Disney theme park and a Dinosaur one. There are now golf courses all over the place, four in the vicinity of the Isadore farm, plus a race course and there are trees all over the Island. There were trees called Suk De Namu which being planted while I was first there but now there are all 20-30 feet high and they are all over the place.

Then there is the Isadore farm itself. The pigs have all gone and instead their descendents belong to private owners. The Hereford cattle are gone and now there is a large dairy unit and feedlot and there are racehorses as well. There is a medical clinic there, a youth centre and a hospice. All the old landmarks of the farm are gone and replaced by new ones. Then there is this massive church that can seat 2000 people on the inside and 4000 on the roof. Then all the rock walled thatched roofed houses are gone, now relegated to the museum, replaced by more modern houses. Another incredible marvel was the Stations of the Cross which consisted of bronze life size figures giving the stages of the crucifixion of Christ right from the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane right to the resurrection. They were amazing sculptures, so lifelike and so moving. We took heaps of photo of them.

I could go on but you get the drift. Cheju Island, to my way of thinking, hadn't just changed over those 33 years. It had transformed from something from the third world to what I would call the Queenstown of South Korea. It's not a cheap place to visit anymore.

I believe that what has happened there is an illustration of what Paul is talking about in Romans 12:1-2 when he said in verse 2; **“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”** We, disciples of Jesus Christ need to be a people who are transformed and continually being transformed and the agent of transformation, I believe is the Word of God guided by God's Holy Spirit. We need to be a people who are transformed in the way we think and in how we view things around us. We need to be a people who have been transformed to the degree where those outside the Christian community can see that we are different and look at us saying; “What have you got that we haven't because whatever it is, we want it.” If that isn't the case, then how the church grow as what would there be within the church that would draw other people to come in to join us? Ideally, the transformation in our lives and characters, as disciples of Jesus, should cause amazement in the eyes of outsiders to something of the degree of the amazement I experienced going back to Cheju Island after those 33 years. I believe that as a church we still fall far short of this as if that were so there would be no problem with the issue of church growth. It would just happen.

However, that does not often seem to be the case. When I was in my first parish, it wasn't long before I struggled to see any difference between the group of people in the church of which I was the minister and any other social group in the community. In fact many of them were struggling to understand what faith in Christ really meant and I found that the fellowship in the local pub was far better than that in the church. Surely that should not be.

But what do we need to be transformed into? what are we called to be like? If we go to Acts 2:42-47 we get a picture of the kind of people we are called to become; **"They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to everyone as they had need. Every day they continued to meet in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number."**

Here there is a picture of people who have been touched by God's spirit, who are committed to the teaching of Christ and to each other's well being, they are joyful and sincere and there is something really attractive about these people that puts them in favor with those outside the church and inspires them to come and join with them. But a major feature here is that they were not so much focused on what they themselves were doing or on what they were trying to achieve. Instead they are looking at what God was doing with a sense of awe and expectation.

Towards the end of the time of my period of VSA in Cheju Island, after I had come to know the Lord, a couple of us went up to Seoul, to a Catholic Charismatic Seminar that was being held at the Eighth Army Camp. This was attended by all kinds of people, Koreans and foreigners and it was an incredible time of seeing God work especially through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as words of knowledge, prophecies and healings. People saw visions, people were set free from torment and problems.

One young guy, who was in the army, was really troubled by he was in an environment where the temptation to fall into drinking and being lured by prostitutes was overwhelming. A couple of us joined hands with him and prayed for him. The next thing that happened was that the Holy Spirit touched him and he leapt up running around the place praising God. He was set free. The Holy Spirit came upon him in a way that he suddenly realized that with God he would be okay.

During that week though what I found there was that my focus changed from looking at myself to looking at what God was doing and getting excited about that. God was doing things and we were continually thinking; "Now what is He going to do next?" Then when He acted we saw that our role was to join in with what He was doing in the way the Holy Spirit was leading us.

This all fits in with the other reading that I shared with John 5, especially verse 19 when Jesus said; "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by Himself; He can only do what He sees the Father doing, because whatever the Father does, the Son also

does.” Here is a picture of what Jesus was doing during His ministry. He would be looking around to see what God the Father was doing, then when He did that, He would join in with what God was doing, empowered and led by the Holy Spirit. As followers of our Lord Jesus Christ this, I believe, is what is expected of us.

Last year in our men’s Bible study group we went through a study by Henry and Richard Blackaby called “Experiencing God.” Here he outlined seven realities of experiencing God and they are as follow;

- 1) God is always at work around you.
- 2) God pursues a continuing love relationship with you that is real and personal.
- 3) God invites you to become involved with Him in His work.
- 4) God speaks by the Holy Spirit, through the Bible, prayer, circumstances and the church to reveal Himself, His purposes and His ways.
- 5) God’s invitation for you to work with Him always leads you to a crisis of belief that requires faith and action.
- 6) You must make major adjustments in your life to join God in what He is doing.
- 7) You come to know God by experience as you obey Him, and He accomplishes His work through you.

There was a guy called Leonie Riley who, back in 1999, came to pastor a church in Kentucky in the Appalachian mountains where the people there were really poor. He didn’t really know what he was going to do. After they had been there for about six months there was a community prayer meeting with all denominations participating. During the meeting people came up to him asking what should they be praying for. Leonie replied that they should be praying for two things. One was to ask forgiveness for not trusting in God but putting their trust in US Steel, International Harvester and the US Government and not putting their trust in God and it had got them no where. Secondly they should ask God to provide them with the things they need in order to have a quality of life that brings honor to God.

Well after that God started doing things in the community with the result of Leonie and others in his church following God in what He was doing. One of the things Leonie began to see was that 98% of the children came from families that were so poor that they qualified for the free lunch that was provided at the school. For many that was the only meal they had. So Leonie asked God to send food. Before long food started turning up from various unexpected means. This resulted in the church opening a place called Manna House that gave out about \$25000 worth of food per month. It also provided counseling and help to many people and quite a few came to Christ because of it.

Then there was a businessman in the town who bought the old theatre in order to renovate it and to hold Christian concerts and revival meetings in it. He asked Leonie if he had any theatre seats. Leonie replied that he didn’t have any but if any came his way he would let him have them. The next day Leonie received an email from a friend telling of a college who had bought some theatre seats but they were of the wrong kind, did he have a use for them. This resulted in \$100,000 worth of theatre seat going to the renovated theatre that were just the right color as well. From there, held in that theatre, were a number of meetings where quite a few people came to know Christ.

Then Leonie found that in his street were quite a number of empty houses with overgrown hedges and so he bought some hedge clippers and started clipping the hedges. It was then that a guy came along asking for \$75 for basic necessities like food etc. Leonie replied to him was that he did not have \$75 at that time but if it came his way he would let him have it. Just after that a lady visited Leonie and said that she had come to pay the bill for him cutting her hedge. This was totally unexpected and he said that he wasn't looking for being paid for cutting the hedges. Nevertheless this woman insisted that he took the money so he did and hence was able to give the \$75.00 to the guy who asked for it. The God reminded him that the balance of that money was actually a reimbursement of the cost of the hedge clippers which he had bought for doing the job in the first place.

So we have from the two readings that we have had; Romans 12:1-2 and John 5:17-22 these two themes; being transformed by the renewing of our minds and looking around to see what God is doing and responding to it led by the Holy Spirit. To my way of thinking, these two themes can be melded into one and that is; in whatever is going on around us, asking the question; what is God doing here and in what way God is calling me to respond?

So, as we proceed through our AGM this weekend, these themes will unfold for us as we listen to the different speakers who will be sharing about how they see these topics and how God has been working in their lives and in the lives of the churches and communities they are involved in.

I want to finish by coming back to Paul who saw how essential it is for us to undergo transformation in character so that we can be like Christ and reflect His glory. In 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 he wrote; **“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord Who is the Spirit.”**