



14<sup>th</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time Biv  
Excerpts From Ezekiel 2, 2 Corinthians 12 & Mark 6

## Despised

The Church is suffering, and we must all take responsibility for our own faith, and trust that, out of this humbling, there will come new life.  
Fr David King – 4<sup>th</sup> July 2021

*Please read the Gospel before reading this (Mark 6.1-6)*

### 1. Denmark

In February of 2012, I went on an 8-day silent retreat at a place called St Beunos – a Jesuit retreat centre in North Wales. I had been ordained just nine months, and it had been an enjoyable but quite a tough nine months, so it was so great to have the opportunity to stop, rest, and pray, and to just reflect on everything.

- St Beunos had featured in a TV programme all about silence the previous year, the programme had been quite popular so I was excited to be there, and I was looking forward to this retreat. And quite a few other people were there on the retreat too, from all kinds of different backgrounds, though of course, once it started, we couldn't chat to each other at all. Eight full days of silence is quite something to deal with, it's not easy. You have to write yourself a timetable and be quite structured and disciplined about how you use the time, otherwise with just oceans of time on your hands and nothing to do, your mood can plummet quite quickly. So you set aside time for prayer, and then maybe have time to read, or walk, or write. And of course, time for meals too.
- Anyway, on my makeshift timetable, the time that I chose to have my breakfast everyday obviously coincided with the time that this other lady decided to have breakfast, as we were both there in the breakfast room, every day at the same time. Just the two of us. Obviously we didn't speak to each other for the whole week, but it was kinda nice being there at the same time, and even though we never said a word, I think we both enjoyed being there with someone else, just having breakfast. It's amazing how much of a connection you can forge without saying anything at all. By the end of the week I felt like I knew her quite well.
- And when the end of the retreat came, on the very last morning, we finally had a chance to speak to each other. She was from Denmark, and she'd come all this way just to go on retreat at this place – she'd seen the TV programme, all about silence, and she just knew that she had to come.
- She wasn't Catholic, I don't think she was even a Christian, but she was married, with two children, and she was happy, but...she was kinda searching for something more. Not that marriage and children weren't fulfilling, it's just she knew, deep down, that there was something more. We had a really nice conversation. I told her I was a priest, we shared the highs and the lows of the week (of which there were many), and then when it was time to leave we said goodbye. And that was that, I never saw her again. Wherever she is, I really hope she is doing ok.

### 2. Data

- We live in hugely interesting times. Spiritual seeking is high, and I get that, and I see that around me. Google searches for all kinds of things to do with spirituality are high, numbers of people

walking the Camino are high. People really are searching. But at the same time, what we *also* see is a widespread turning away from traditional expressions of Christianity. The facts and figures are quite sobering here and I've have thought long and hard about whether to share these. But I have come to the conclusion that I *have* to share them, this is what is happening, you have the right to know, you *need* to know.

- In a nutshell, in the UK, the numbers of people engaging with the Catholic Church on a weekly basis peaked at about 2 million people in about 1964. Since then, it's been falling, steadily. That number is now at about 500,000, a ¼ of what it was then. So the number of people engaging with the Catholic Church on a weekly basis has dropped 75% over the last 60 years. If those trends continue (and that's a big if) then we will see the complete closure of the Catholic Church in England and Wales in a mere 50 years time. In some parts of the country it will happen a lot quicker than that.
- Now, that rate of change is staggering. Potentially, when I am an old man, unless the picture changes, there will be no Catholic Church left in the UK. I don't think now is the time to try and analyse why this is all happening – it's a very complex and multifaceted problem.
- But it might be worth expressing how I feel about this. In part, I feel deeply concerned and worried about what society will come to look like without the Church, without the Christian faith and the teachings of Jesus in its midst. I worry about the world we are leaving to my young nieces and nephews, and your children and grandchildren. But predominantly I suppose I feel just so sad, that so many people are going to miss out on the incredible joy, the peace and the hope that comes from knowing Jesus. And the truth it brings to us. It is just utterly tragic. I say all of this because, in the Gospel, Jesus was amazed at their lack of faith. And I wonder what he would make of ours?

### 3. Direction

- So, where do we go from here? How do we finish? I know this is a huge thing to just put out there. And I'm sure it will take some time to digest. And I suppose that's not a bad place to start. We all need to digest this, and take some time to think and pray about it. Each one of us needs to take ownership and responsibility for our own faith and, if we have children, passing this faith on to them. In the Gospel we're told that they would not accept him. But the Greek word there is 'skandalizomai' which literally means 'to stumble over an obstacle'.
- There will always be obstacles on this journey of faith, many of them! But we need to think deeply about what we *want*. Because if we want to be a disciple, then we will need to put it first in order to overcome these obstacles, because society is heading in a different direction and unless we are 100% intentional about growing in our faith, we will just be swept along with everyone else. I know that's a challenge, but let's allow it to be there.
- But there has to be good news here, there always is. Paul, in the second reading, talks of finding strength in weakness, because it's then he feels the power of Christ most keenly over him. The Church will be humbled, and yet, maybe that is not such a bad thing, if it means that in the letting go of power and prestige we can rediscover the heart of our Christian faith and what it is all about – loving God, loving our neighbour and loving the world around us through being a disciple of Jesus and celebrating that he is Lord of the World, and that, having defeated death, will bring about the union of heaven and earth in good time. So maybe it is a good thing for the Church to experience its own weakness, in order for us to grow closer to Jesus.

*Jesus, give me the gift of faith. Be my Lord and Master, and never let me be parted from you.*