

Our Prophetic Vocation

I'm very happy to be with you for this Pastoral Visitation: it's good to be up here on the NE frontiers of the Diocese! I thank Fr. David and all of you for all you do to keep the mission of the Church in Wokingham so vibrant. A while ago, I met the Bishop of Trondheim, Norway. The Church in Norway is tiny and his diocese goes beyond the Arctic Circle, with only 11 priests. But one thing gave him hope: that the Church was rarely out of the news. People in the media were forever criticising the Church or ridiculing her, while in return Catholic writers often gave clear and robust replies in defence of their faith. Consequently, the bishop said, there was a constant stream of converts.

Get behind me, Satan! The way you think is not God's way, but man's. In today's Gospel, Jesus says that if we want to be his disciple then like Him we must be prepared to suffer. *If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself, take up his cross and follow me.* Some of that suffering will come from the simple fact that what we believe and try to practice is at odds with what other people think, or with the general drift of today's culture. This is our 'prophetic vocation.' In theology, the word prophet does not mean someone who predicts the future, but one who speaks God's Word, who challenges complacency, who calls people to conversion. This is why prophets are controversial, like Jeremiah in the 1stR: *The word of the Lord has meant for me insult, derision, all day long.* As with Jesus Himself, prophets usually end up in trouble, mocked by the chattering classes, even tortured to death.

This month it will be 5 years since I became the Bishop of our diocese and as I've got to know better our parishes and schools, our clergy and people, the needs of the Church have become clearer to me in prayer and reflection. Our first priority must be prayer to the Holy Spirit for zeal, mission and evangelisation. There are 3.129M people in our area; 230K are Catholics (7%) of whom 35K practice (14%). We need to reach out to people around us, offering the Gospel of salvation; we also need to connect with all the not-yet-practicing Catholics that they can find their way to Jesus in the Mass and sacraments. If we could increase our congregations by 50%, it would revolutionise our parish communities. To do this, we need ourselves to have deeper faith, a better knowledge of our faith and a greater confidence in explaining our faith. There are many helpful resources for this online, as well as here in your parish.

What will a man gain if he wins the whole world, yet ruins his life? In our day and age, it's easy to get the wrong end of the stick, to imbibe worldly opinions rather than the Truth. When you think of evangelising England, or Norway, you might think we need huge armies of priests and people, with plans and strategies. All that can help. But crucially, what's needed are people deeply rooted in Christ, willing to speak out, able to explain and defend the Faith we love and profess. To be sure, this will rouse opposition - and, a temptation to compromise, water down or blunt the doctrines of Faith, something a true prophet would never do. But that's not our way. We must be bold and faithful. When I was ordained bishop, I asked everyone to pray that I would be humble and holy, orthodox, creative and courageous. Maybe that can be your prayer too? But in this Mass, as we ponder our prophetic vocation in Christ, let us pray for the wisdom to know the Truth, the courage to defend it, the skill to express it, and the zeal and love to inspire it.