

THE CHALLENGES OF MISSION

In my life, I've only ever been to Ireland twice and never to Lough Derg, St. Patrick's Purgatory in Donegal where people go to do penance. It's a harsh place I'm told, where you walk barefoot, sleep on the floor and live on bread and water. People sometimes spend a week there. On my first trip to Ireland, the old priest at Mass was telling us about a cynical, young American, an atheist who'd come to Ireland to trace his roots. Now as you know, there's often two of everything in Ireland and the Lough Derg *he* wanted was not Purgatory but the holiday resort in Co. Clare. Given the wrong directions, he'd set off by bus and boat and when he landed on the island, thinking it a strange local custom, he obediently took off his shoes and walked barefoot over jagged rocks. It was just as the boat left for the weekend that someone pointed out his mistake. Yet that mistake changed his life! For by Monday, he decided to stay the week. It was at that point in the sermon that the old priest stopped, looked up and said to us: *By the way, I am that man!*

A prophet is only despised in his own country, among his own relations and in his own house. In today's Gospel, Jesus finds Himself in a context in which He can't preach or work miracles or offer eternal life. --Because His listeners were unable to receive him; their hearts and minds were closed. Their spiritual development was so *inf-antile* they missed the point; *He was amazed at their lack of faith.* In other words, He found Himself among people and family who were very nice but not yet able to be converted. They didn't know who He was. They couldn't understand what He said. Perhaps they weren't even interested? It's a challenging context any priest and pastor will be familiar with: urging parents at a Catholic school to bring their children to Mass, preaching to a fidgety crowd at a wedding, arranging a funeral with lapsed relatives, or being asked to 'christen' the baby of a couple you've never seen before. Like the Lord, many pastors feel frequently they can work no miracle there. Perhaps this is your experience too: a parent worried about children, or the only one in your house going to Mass?

There are two things to remember. First, as Catholics, people filled with the love of Jesus and the joy of the Gospel, we must never give up striving to hand on our faith to others. This desire is central to the new evangelisation the Church is calling us to. Every single one of us has a duty to do our best to spread the faith, for Jesus has called us to be missionary-disciples. But secondly, results don't matter. We rarely see the fruits. For faith is God's work. It's our task to create the arena but only God can give the Gift. You can take a horse to the trough but you can't make it drink. We need to remember, God has a relationship with every child, woman and man on earth in ways unknown and invisible to you and me. We may do the planting - but let God do the work.

Our eyes are on the Lord til He shew us His mercy said the Psalm. Today's Gospel is a challenge. We have to preach the Gospel at all times, even if people are not yet ready to receive it. After all, what is closed today might be open tomorrow. The cynical American *did* eventually undergo a conversion. But God is love: His Spirit is powerful; He works in mysterious ways. So in this Mass, let us ask the Holy Spirit to pour out abundantly the gift of faith, especially on our nearest and dearest. And let us pray also for ourselves too, that we'll never lose heart in the evangelising mission Christ has given us.