

## **Sermon for Iraqi Mass – Westminster Cathedral – Monday June 16<sup>th</sup>**

One of the solemn duties that is laid on every bishop when he is ordained is that he should have “a constant care for all the churches and gladly come to the aid and support of churches in need. We do this in all sorts of ways in England and Wales, but particularly through the Department for International Affairs in the Bishops’ Conference.

At the moment, it is my privilege to head up the work of the department and it’s this responsibility which has enabled me to work in support of fellow Christians in the Middle East and in Southern Africa, especially Zimbabwe – a country which desperately needs our prayer and support at this time.

My most recent overseas solidarity visit was to Iraq, which is home to so many of you who have gathered here for this Mass today. Together with Bishop William Kenney, I spent some days in the north of the country at the invitation of Bishop Andreas Abouna, who will be well known to many of you following the years that he spent in London as Chaplain to the Iraqi community. Our visit – and his invitation – came hard on the heels of the tragic kidnapping and death of Archbishop Rahho of Mosul.

In this country, we may feel that we know quite a lot about the situation in Iraq but our knowledge largely stems from what we know and read about of the military activity in and around Baghdad and Basra. Only occasionally do we look further afield and it’s really only when we do that do we become aware of the ways in which the Christian community – your Christian community – is suffering and being continually harassed and threatened.

I now have some idea, albeit very superficial, of the sufferings and hardships being faced and endured by your Christian brothers and sisters – and they are considerable. The continuing violence in the country has seriously wounded your community in a particular way and the murder of lay people and clergy by extremists of all sorts has been both systematic and deliberately relentless.

But this is only part of the picture. My visit, which took me to Erbil, Kirkuk and Sulemaniyah, allowed me to share faith with your bishops, the priests and your fellow citizens. I was hugely encouraged and strengthened by their courage and fidelity. We visited the seminary in Ainkawa where we found 27 young men studying for the priesthood and we spent fruitful time with them, with their teachers and with the religious communities of sisters who work so tirelessly and fearlessly for the spread of the Gospel.

Our gathering here today for this celebration of Mass, to which I most warmly welcome you all, is as much about them and the people they serve as it is about being a desperate prayer to the Lord for his gift of peace for a deeply troubled land.

We've listened today to St Paul exhorting his readers – and us – to place all our cares into the Lord's hands, at the same time as constantly striving for all that is true, honourable, upright and pure.

In the situation, which faces the Christian community in Iraq today, it would be easy to lose hope and allow ourselves to succumb to the relentless cycle of violence, recrimination and revenge. But we know that this cannot be the Christian way.

Our calling, however hard and demanding it may be – and I acknowledge that it is easy for me to say this in the relative comfort of the context of the situation that faces us here in England – is to strive to become more and more like Christ, the Son of God. Living in his shadow and in the light of his call, we begin to discover the blessing of the Kingdom that belongs to the poor in spirit. In Him, and as we become more and more like Him, we inherit the earth as promised to the gentle; we receive the comfort of those who mourn and the mercy for those who show mercy, the vision of God for those who are single-minded in His service. The persecuted – and you find yourselves either directly or indirectly among them – are children of God, even if that means that, like Christ, you are crucified in your thirst for peace.

But my lasting impression from my visit was not one of despair and hopelessness; much more, I will remember and treasure the memory that I have been among a people for whom the light of faith is alive. It was a blessing for me to have been able to experience that and share in that in some small way. As is so often the case, I think I received in my visit to Iraq far more than I was able to contribute.

I shall return before too long, but today, we need to pray in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Iraq; we need to pray for peace – and Christ's peace, not simply an end to hostilities – for your country. We need to pray for God's blessings on all who live and suffer there and for all of you who are far from home and yet near to families and friends who live in danger and hardship. And we pray that the Lord fill us with all the blessings and graces that He promises to those who are faithful.

**Bishop Crispian Hollis**