



## The Persecuted Church

Parish priest at Farm Street, London, **Fr Dominic Robinson SJ** shares memories of his recent visit to Christians in Iraq. We offer his witness in the context of the Pope's Intention. Churches were lit in red in November last to remind us to pray for the persecuted church.

In November 2018 I spent a week in the Nineveh Plains in northern Iraq, visiting a number of towns and villages destroyed by Daesh, so-called Islamic State terrorists. Since 2014 this ancient biblical land has seen the Christian population driven out in huge numbers through sackings of towns and villages, those who dared to remain terrorised or slaughtered, all leaving a trail of devastation and trauma.

Reconciliation is still a long way off.

**Pope's Intention: That Christian communities, especially those who are persecuted, feel that they are close to Christ and have their rights respected.**

Yet the Christian family is beginning to re-form, people are going back, churches are being rebuilt, schools reopened, trauma counselling on a serious scale set up. Christians are moving back home – yes, back home after four years of displacement, exile, forced away from homes, lives destroyed, education curtailed.

In the village of Karamles we saw how the church, partially burnt by

Daesh, was now being restored, and houses were being rebuilt. Children were being bussed into local schools, Christian and Muslim children together. The Christian community is vital for the future of Iraq, to build bridges again, for reconciliation and peaceful coexistence.

We visited Giselle, a wonderful lady in her 90s. Now she is back home. Why? 'Because', she said repeatedly, 'this is my home, this is our home – we have been here as Christians since the time of the Apostle Thomas'. Giselle went on to say she has hope for the future, because she is a Christian. It struck many of us how saintly Giselle was – not a word of hostility and despair but words

only of faith, hope and love. That is why Christians are needed to stay in Iraq.

In Qaraqosh we visited the wonderful Dominican sisters who fled as a whole community in 2014. They are back too, teaching in the University of Mosul, mixing in with the Muslim majority. It is still frightening: we heard how extremist groups are still existing under different names. Yet



again the sisters spoke words of hope not despair.

In Batnaya we had an eerie experience. The town had just been reopened by the government ten days before and we encountered it as it was when the terrorists left – the church partly burnt out with statues decapitated, IS logos on the walls, all buildings reduced to rubble. As we walked through some of these burnt out buildings there were still children’s shoes and desecrated religious objects lying around – we were advised not to touch as they may have been loaded with explosives. The sheer scale of evil inflicted here was in the air.

Then a car sped by and stopped. It was the group of parishioners who

were going to show us around the church. Now living in makeshift accommodation in a nearby town they were here to tell their story. ‘Are you going to return?’, we asked. ‘Yes, of course, this is our home and this is our faith, our parish, our Church’, they replied. ‘And can you forgive and live side by side with those who committed these dreadful crimes?’, we asked. ‘We have to wait and see but our faith calls us to forgive, to reconcile and to live in a peaceful respectful society.’ That kind of encounter teaches not just about the current situation in Iraq but teaches me so much about faith, about what it is to be Church, about what it is to be the Christian community even in the midst of division, suffering and evil. ❤️