

## How Universal is my Church ?

The Pharisees were shocked when they found Jesus eating his lunch with 'sinners'. You'll find the story in Luke 15, 1-10. Immediately we can see they have put themselves into the place of non sinners. They are the chosen few, the 'elect', better than everyone else. Worse, for them sin (or their idea of it) was contagious. So, not only was Jesus condoning it, worse still he was putting his own soul at risk. He should close his doors against such people, keep them out. The Pharisees were exclusive. They were a sect. And we should take note.

Christians are all part of a Catholic Church, that is the Universal Church. But what do we mean by universal? Most of us would say it means a Church made up of all the Christians of the world, of whatever denomination ; in other words, the faithful. But doesn't that make us exclusive too? Jesus was calling everyone, everywhere, 'sinners' and non believers, most of all. Humanity is one big family. Only, we don't behave like it. We are far too preoccupied with the running of our own local parish, bowing in the direction of a diocesan leader – bishop or archbishop. We close our doors and pray the usual prayers, hear the familiar readings while the concerns and preoccupations of humanity at large remain outside.

It's time to open our doors. Remember how the people of New York flooded into their cathedral on 9/11, needy for comfort, seeking something beyond the world which had just crumbled into dust before their very eyes ? It wasn't just the christian faithful, it was jews and muslims, aetheists, and above all sinners ; a spontaneous response to a need. And the Church responded by literally opening its doors.

Sometimes moments of crisis show us the way. We have all been shaking our heads about the diminishing number of active church goers. The faithful are getting old and ill. Where are all the young people ? We know we are supposed to go out into the world and evangelise. But we just don't know how. We feel rather lost. And why ? We have stuck our heads in the sand.

And now some form of 9/11 is repeating itself all over the world. It feels remarkably like the end days, like the Book of Revelations coming to life before our very eyes. With even the planet in crisis, we are all living in existential angst. The Church, the Universal Church has never been more needed, and yet we have forgotten how to respond. Why are we not holding regular vigils praying and singing for the success of COP26 ? We have failed to care for creation. We have exploited and abused it almost to destruction. We have forgotten that we are in it, part of it, one with it and that we are abusing ourselves. We need to be sorry about that. We need to be ready to do our best to put right whatever we can. And we are sorry and we do want to do our best. But we need something, someone to help us, to encourage and comfort us. Christians would put it this way : 'What we need is God's grace.' But the need is the same even if we are not familiar with the words. It's the time for opening the doors, of letting people, all kinds of people in, allowing them to express themselves, so feeling not only welcome but accepted. And so we will bring in those seekers of God who years since lost their way, those who had always been too busy, and those who always felt they weren't good enough, along with the 'sinners' most in need of God's love.

And we won't talk down to them, dominate the vigils and gatherings that will come about, we will also listen and we will sing 'It's a beautiful world' and 'The Song of creation' and read poetry and our arms and our hearts will be open – and we will know what 'universal' means.

Gavin Brown,

diacre de la paroisse Saint-Sauveur en civraisien