

## **Ballyvaloo**

16 August 2021

### **Welcome**

As we all know, the faith is in crisis in our times. By faith, I mean not just the “church” but the Christian project as such. People have indeed walked away. The fuss about first communions is a fuss about a cultural left-over of long vanished convictions. Much of this is understandable but part of it really puzzles me. How can people walk away from such a wonderful vision without some regret, some sense of loss? In a way, do they really know what they are leaving behind? I suspect not. Next Sunday’s Gospel has Jesus ask Peter: will you also go away? The earlier form of the same question is found in Luke’s Gospel: who do you say I am?

### **Topic**

This is a question for our time *and for all of us, each one of us.*

### **Steps**

Right now, three books are essential reading. There is Derek Scally’s *The Best Catholics in the Word*, Ellen Coyne’s *Are You There, God? Its me, Ellen*, and finally *The Truth at the Heart of the Lie*, by James Carroll. All three attempt a history – how did we end up in this crisis? All three are trying to understand and to process. All three wonder where to from here? For us, as Catholics in Ireland, perhaps Scally’s is the most useful. There’s a history of the last 30 years, familiar because we’ve lived through it and very uncomfortable reading it is to have all that awful stuff between the two covers of one book. Scally is himself what he calls a grappling Catholic – still in there and trying to make sense of it all. He even wonders if it is too early to try to come to terms with it all.

There are different temptations at this point. One is a kind of nostalgic restorationism: lets get back to an ideal time. That can be nearly anything: the 1950s full churches, Celtic spirituality, the Tridentine Mass. The illusion here is building the future by microwaving the past, usually some highly idealised version. Another temptation is to make fixing the church a priority. This is the risk of the National Synod in 2023 (apart from the other risks). Of course, the church needs fixing (!), in a variety of clear and courageous ways. But we won’t get there by making the church our main priority. The church is a means, an instrument, by which we proclaim Christ to the world. Instead, of the church, our priority should be the Gospel, Christ, God, the Spirit, the message of life and hope – the thrilling adventure of discipleship, love and service. How can we talk about, present, proclaim that adventure today? Only in light of the fundamental Christian project re-imagined can we begin to think what “church” should be like in order to proclaim the Gospel effectively. Then we might set about fixing the church.

These might all seem above our pay grade here on the retreat in Ballyvaloo. Still, we all live in this time and this culture and are not unaffected. You will have noticed that our programme incorporates three of the four essential marks of the Christian odyssey.

The first of these is a return to Word of God, found chiefly in the Scriptures. As we see last evening in *Lectio*, this leads inevitably to new, grown-up questions and, we hope, to a new grown-up understanding.

The second is meditation, that is, the prayer of presence. The personal journey of faith is a hunger of the heart, a quest, which leads usually to some kind of Christian quiet prayer in the Benedictine tradition.

The third is community belonging, celebrated in the Eucharist. None of us does this alone. All communities of faith are in a way temporary, for now and not usually for always. On a retreat like this, we form a temporary but real community of faith; we trust each other and we entrust our experiences of the journey to each other.

The fourth element is a broad one: discipleship, service, justice in all its senses. In other words, the transformation of me and my immediate world, the big vision.

### **Conclusion**

Bran Grogan SJ enjoys telling the following story. A man came across a sparrow, lying on its back with its little feet pointing upwards. "What are you doing?" "I'm trying to prevent the sky from falling in." "Do you think that helps?" "One does what one can!" Each of us should be able to account for the hope that is in us – at least to ourselves! The hymn in Philippians challenges us to reflect on what happened for us in the great events that gave us new life in Christ. The Gospel from Luke speaks directly: who do you say I am?