

A window into heaven... and hell



A window into heaven... and hell: As another battered Iraqi town is liberated from the evil clutch of ISIS, Christians celebrate their first mass in two years while the Battle for Mosul enters its third week

A handful of Christians celebrated their first Sunday mass at a local burnt-out church in two years after their town was recaptured from ISIS.

Those living in the Christian town of Qaraqosh made their way to the church despite the chaos continuing around them as the Battle for Mosul enters its third week.

The bell tower at the Grand Immaculate Church was damaged, statues were decapitated and missals strewn across the nave floor.

A statue of Jesus on a cross was damaged and the church is still covered in soot from the fire the jihadists lit when they retreated just days earlier.

But some of the crosses have already been replaced and a new icon was laid on the main altar, where armed Christian militiamen took turns to light candles.

Yohanna Petros Mouche, the Syriac Catholic Archbishop of Mosul who led the mass, said: 'After two years and three months in exile, I just celebrated the Eucharist in the cathedral of the Immaculate Conception the Islamic State wanted to destroy.'

It comes as Iraqi forces said on Sunday that they had recaptured a series of villages surrounding jihadist-held Mosul as the operation to retake the city from Daesh neared its third week.

Meanwhile, huge plumes of thick black smoke could be seen from inside damaged buildings with smashed windows after ISIS tried to prevent Iraqi forces from retaking cities and towns around Mosul.

One local resident living in Al Qayyarah - 40 miles south of Mosul - looked out of his window and saw the devastation outside after members of ISIS set fire to nearby oil wells.

Tens of thousands of Iraqi troops and Kurdish peshmerga fighters have been advancing on Mosul from the north, east and south after the launch on October 17 of a vast offensive to retake IS's last stronghold in the country.

After standing largely on the sidelines in the first days of the assault, forces from the Hashed al-Shaabi - a paramilitary umbrella organisation dominated by Iran-backed Shiite militias - began a push on Saturday towards the west of Mosul.

The ultimate aim is the recapture of Tal Afar, a town west of the city, and the severing of jihadist supply lines between Mosul and Syria.

In a series of statements on Sunday, the Hashed's media office announced it had retaken at least four villages southwest of Mosul.

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