

Over the past 25 years, amidst the murder and mayhem, we have prayed for peace in Northern Ireland. How long can this go on, we have asked. Do our children have to grow up in this atmosphere of suspicion and fear? In addition to the human toll, the situation here has had a devastating effect on the local economy. Potential investors have been scared off. Many of our young people have felt the need to emigrate, never to return.

And of course, in the atmosphere such as we have had to live in, suspicions are inevitable. For those working in the security forces, suspicion is part of self-preservation. Even on holidays well away from home you meet people from particular areas of the Province and you feel you have to be cautious about how much you say about yourself.

Then there are individuals and families and communities for whom murder has been horribly personal. Thousands have been maimed in body and mind by what has happened. During this time there have been hopes raised only to be dashed and if we are honest with ourselves, opportunities missed or mishandled.

What we have come to euphemistically call 'The Troubles' have given us a wariness, wariness of other people, wariness of new developments for fear of where they may lead us, and so many of us have found it hard to identify with the euphoria coming from news of the IRA ceasefires coming from commentators on our TV or in the newspapers.

I must confess myself on Wednesday and Thursday to a mixture of emotions. Over the last number of years, I have prayed for peace and lead others in prayers for peace. An essential element of that had to be an end to IRA violence. One part of me wanted to rejoice and one part of me was afraid. As I ploughed through the

paper on Thursday I came across a comment by the Belfast correspondent of the London Independent that rang true for me.

‘Northern Ireland faces a moment without exact precedent - a moment alive with both opportunities and dangers.’

There was another comment in an interview on the Morning News;

‘The time has come to light a candle rather than curse the darkness.’

What is needed more than ever is a period of calm. We have a possibility of peace but we do not have peace. For peace is more than an absence of conflict. There has to be an element of harmony, trust and common purpose. The establishment of that is a long-term business requiring patience and sensitivity on all sides.

At this time, our political leaders have a great task before them. More than ever, they need our prayers. For political leaders are called upon not only to articulate the aspirations and fears of their own community but also to point away forward. This may involve saying things that may not initially be very popular with all sections of their community. Let us pray for them in the days to come, that God may guide them and strengthen them in the task that lies before them

As I said the events of the last 25 years have given us a wariness. There are feelings in our hearts of suspicion, of anger, of bitterness. There are good reasons for these feelings. It would be unreal to suggest that it should be otherwise in the light of what has happened. If Northern Ireland is to have the sort of future that will encourage our young people to stay, that will encourage businesses to invest then those feelings of suspicion, of anger have to loosen their grip on our hearts.

This is not something that will happen overnight or in our own strength. This is something that God, and God alone, will do for us. What is required is for us to want this to happen. Maybe this is the first gift we need to ask of God, that he might plant this desire in our hearts.

Please don't misunderstand me. There are good reasons for these feelings in our hearts and God understands that - but God does want to lift this burden from us.

In the versicles and responses of morning and evening prayer we have the petition;

O God make clean our hearts within us;
and take not thy Holy Spirit from us.

This can be a prayer for us. That God by his Holy Spirit would work in US and through us to bring his healing touch to bear on our province.

As the man in the paper said, this is a time of both opportunity and danger. Peace has not yet come - there is a possibility. As such our political leaders shoulder a heavy burden. May God direct them and strengthen them at this time. We have prayed for peace, and we continue in our prayers. May God keep us and direct us in both the opportunities and dangers of this time - that his please may finally settle upon this land of ours.