

He showed them his hands and his side.

In the words of hymn 219

Come see his hands and his feet.
The scars that speak of sacrifice.
Hands that flung stars into space
To cruel nails surrendered

My mind goes back to walking out of a ward in Antrim Area Hospital. I meet a young man who was going in to see his father. He sees my collar. He rolls up his arm and shows me scars on his arm, marks of self-harm, of intravenous drug abuse. As he spoke he became more and more angry, embittered; angry at society, at church, at life. That afternoon I was the lightning rod through which that anger was discharged. I never saw him or heard from again but I recall a man bearing deep scars in body, mind and spirit.

Last Sunday, Easter Day, as we gathered for worship, word was coming through of horrific events in Sri Lanka. In the days that have followed, as the death toll has mounted and the funerals got under way, we have seen very human reactions and emotions – from stunned silence, to anger. Why was this life taken, why were we not protected – why, why? These are events that leave their mark, their scars on individuals, on communities, on the whole of Sri Lanka.

Also over last weekend, we were seeing the unfolding reaction to the tragic death of a young journalist, Lyra McKee in Derry. We have seen a whole range of reaction from the rather tortured explanation/apology from the

dissident Republican group that admitted responsibility. There was the very powerful image of those who marched on the headquarters of the group and placed red hand prints all across the front of the building as part of an expression of anger in the local community to what had happened. While every needless death is tragic, the circumstances of Lyra McKee's death, the contribution she had made in her professional life, this has struck a particular chord. We have seen a discomfort in the political establishment as they have witnessed an anger and frustration with them in their failure to offer leadership, real leadership in society. This is clearly leaving its mark, its scars, on Northern Ireland. Then there was the funeral in St Ann's Cathedral, an act of worship, of celebration of a young life cut short along with a powerful expression of frustration as the preacher, Fr Martin Magill asked 'Why in God's name does it take the death of a 29 year-old woman with her whole life in front of her' for people to come together? – that clearly resonated with those who had gathered. There was also voiced in that Cathedral Service a determination that things cannot be allowed to stagnate.

What do we do with anger, what do we do with scars? Anger of course does need to find expression, does need to be heard, does need to be acknowledged.

Our Gospel reading finds us in the upper room on the evening of that first Easter Day. The disciples are in hiding, behind locked doors and they experience Jesus among them, showing the scars of his passion, speaking words of peace. It continues:

²¹Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and

said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

John 20;21ff

In the course of the history of the Church, these words of the risen Jesus have been interpreted in an authoritative sense, as the basis for the discipline of excommunication, as a basis for an authority to grant or withhold absolution. It becomes an instrument of power and control.

I much prefer to see these words in terms of a basic statement of fact. Hurts held on to can fester and become more embedded. Hurts that are let go can bring release and healing. But this is not a process that can be forced or imposed from the outside. To say to someone who has been hurt, ‘You really must forgive’, when they are not in that time and space to do that, can add to the hurt and pain and guilt that is already there. There is a ministry of presence, of waiting and listening.

The risen Jesus we are told breathed on them and said ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’. This healing of hurt and pain is nothing less than a work of the Spirit. The Church, as the Body of Christ, is called as a community to be a channel of this work of healing and reconciliation in the world. To offer time and space for listening, healing and reconciliation. There are some wonderful examples of this in our own time.

In the darkest days of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, long before peace talks began, the Corrymeela Centre in Ballycastle, established as a Community of Reconciliation even before the Troubles began, was a place of encounter where opposing politicians and even paramilitary leaders made initial contacts with

each other. In Belfast itself Fr Alec Reid, of Clonard Monastery, and Rev Dr Ken Newell of Fitzroy Presbyterian Church established a shared ministry of witness to peace and reconciliation. All through that period the Church of Ireland Cathedral of St Ann's became a place of ecumenical openness and sharing, a place where people from all across the community gathered for prayer at crucial times in the Peace process, at times of tension in the Province; this is why it was chosen as the venue for the funeral last week.

The risen Christ came and stood among them and showed them his hands and his side; he said peace be with you; he breathed on them and said 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

May we, in our own day, be enabled to be instruments of Christ's work of healing and reconciliation in the place and time that God has placed us.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen