

At the beginning of the final stages of the negotiations in Stormont that lead to the signing of the Belfast Agreement on Good Friday in 1998, Tony Blair spoke of the hand of history being on the shoulders of those who had gathered for those talks. I well recall the feelings of so many in Northern Ireland as they began to get their heads around what was a truly historic agreement. There were many more hurdles along that road until the final decisive agreement between the DUP and Sinn Fein that sealed the long term viability of the arrangements negotiated in the Belfast Agreement.

Last Tuesday, as the plane bearing Queen Elizabeth II touched down at Casement Aerodrome (named after a former Privy Counsellor hanged for High Treason), the shared history of these two islands entered a new era.

The programme of events drawn up by the two governments demonstrated a profound sensitivity to the historical realities of our complex past. The laying of wreaths at the Garden of Remembrance and at Islandbridge, the welcome given by the leaders of the GAA to the Queen at Croke Park, the President's invitation to former leaders of the UDA and two quite outstanding speeches by the President and the Queen, all represented an honest acknowledgement of the past coupled with a recognition of the part that all will have to play in a future built on mutual respect and partnership.

One of the abiding images of the week for me was the picture on the front of Wednesday's 'Irish Independent' of the Queen standing head bowed after laying her wreath in the Garden of Remembrance with the headline 'A moment

of healing'. As I read that, I recalled a series of Prayer Vigils organised in St Ann's Cathedral in Belfast in the period around the paramilitary Ceasefires, the long drawn out negotiations under the chairmanship of Senator George Mitchell, all against the background of Drumcree. These Prayer Vigils went under the heading of 'Prayers for the Healing of Our Land'. The events of this week have represented a major step in that process of healing. I think not just of the big events but also the things that happened on the sidelines. The public greeting by the President of the UDA leaders as she and the Queen left Islandbridge, the sight of members of the Orange Order chatting casually with members of the Irish Defence Forces, the informality of the atmosphere of the reception in Croke Park. Rarely have three words spoken in Irish made such a profound impact on those who heard them. I think also of the welcome given to Iris Robinson, wife of Peter Robinson, by President McAleese at the State reception in Dublin Castle. Peter Robinson spoke of his delight at the welcome given to his wife and then went on to talk of the appalling ignorance about the effects of mental illness and the damage done by insensitive remarks in the press by others. The very fact this occasion gave him an opportunity to speak on this matter offers hope and healing to others.

All this set me reflecting on the whole issue of healing, of spiritual healing. This week underlined a conviction I have long held that healing, spiritual healing is about far more than dealing with external symptoms. In the Gospel accounts of Jesus' healing ministry healing is always associated with expression of faith, declaration of forgiveness, dealing with issues and factors far deeper than the merely physical. The Queen spoke of how with historical

hindsight we may have done things differently or maybe not at all, echoing remarks of President McAleese, 'We cannot change the past but we have chosen to change the future.'

So much of that can be applied in the field of our individual lives and family relationships. Which of us could not echo the words of the Queen, 'how with historical hindsight we may have done things differently or maybe not at all'; which of us could not benefit from the approach counselled by the President when she said, 'We cannot change the past but we have chosen to change the future.'

So today, as we do every Sunday, we pray for God's healing touch. Thinking of the vision of John in the final chapter of Revelation, he speaks of a vision of a new Jerusalem, with a river running through it and continues:

On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. *Rev 20:2*

We pray for a healing of the nations, a healing of our land, its public and political life, its business life and the values that shape our society. We pray for a healing of community and family life. In solidarity with those who are worried about the health of either themselves or loved ones, we pray for God's healing, however that might manifest itself, of those for whom we pray.

We thank God for a truly remarkable week in the life of the history of these islands. May God continue to strengthen and inspire all those who seek to promote the ongoing work of peace and reconciliation in this land.