

This time last year, as we gathered for our Easter General Vestry, we had recently completed the work on the roof of St Mary's and associated works. We were quite justifiably feeling good about ourselves, There had been a very positive outcome from our fundraising efforts, we had received grant aid from a number of both Church and State bodies and we were back in the Church.

As I said at the time, we need to focus on the future and what lies ahead for us as a Church and as a society.

Before we embarked on the work on the roof, we spent a great deal of time and energy identifying the nature of the problem that lay before us. So there was a detailed examination of the structure and a scheme of works drawn up, laying out the work that was required and how it would be carried out.

We then had to identify what resources were available to us in terms of monies already raised, grants for which we qualified and what was the shortfall. To meet this shortfall, we had to decide would we make a further appeal, would we liquify assets, would we seek further borrowing facilities. It was on the basis of all this preparatory work, that we were able to bring the project to a successful conclusion.

As you are probably tired of me saying, 'Fixing the roof has been the easy bit. What goes on under the roof is going to be a harder problem.'

As we prepare to tackle that problem (and tackle it we must) we need a similarly honest appraisal of the nature of the issues that are facing us in the coming years both as a Church and as a society.

Beginning with our own Parish. Again I have said a number of times over the years, 'Take a look around you in Church and add 10 years to everyone's age.' It's not a pretty picture. When I first arrived here in 2005, the attendance at the 9:30 was consistently over 40. It would now be 20-25, frequently dipping lower. The attendance at the 11:00 would have been 95-100 (with more at the Family Service). It is now down to 50-55 (with Family Service generally drawing in 70-75). Sunday School is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain – not helped by sports clubs offering very attractive training programmes for 6 year olds and over on a Sunday morning.

The society in which we live is changing rapidly. Since my arrival in 2005, we have seen referenda on marriage equality and abortion (with one more coming up on Friday) that have signalled massive changes in Irish society that few would have forecast even 20 years ago. The last Census returns yield some sobering statistics. In the Dublin Metropolitan area 48% of those in the age range 25-29 returned themselves as having no religious affiliation.

We are standing on the brink of a significant increase in the population of both the Peninsula and the Baldoyle area of the area covered by this Parish. There are going to be large apartment developments in both the Techrete site and in the village. We are also seeing an acceleration of construction on the Baldoyle Racecourse site. In common with other areas people will come to Churches looking for community, looking for meaning in life. Many will have little or no recent experience of Church life. Will they find a community that welcomes them in their difference?

In the words of the song of my own youth; 'The times they are a changing.'

So what are the resources that we bring to these issues that we have identified. As we were embarking on our fundraising, one senior member of this Parish, regular in worship with a long history of service to this Parish, asked me a fundamental question. 'With numbers the way they are going, should we even be doing this?' Uncomfortable questions do need to be asked. We proceeded on the basis of faith, of a conviction that God does have a purpose for this place. So the first resource we bring to this is that conviction that God does have a purpose for this place. God's purposes are not static – they need to be discerned afresh in every generation. We have people. We have the people who worship faithfully and we also have people who still want to express an association with this place – people seek baptism for their children, burial for their loved ones and Christian marriage. It is easy to write them off as 'four wheel Christians'. When I meet with people in advance of these life marking events, I recognise people who are living very pressurised, exhausting lives who are looking for meaning beyond themselves. I never cease to be amazed by some of our young people presenting themselves for Confirmation, the questions they ask, their honesty, their zest for life. This year's group, as part of their preparation took on board the problems faced by refugees, organising a coffee morning to raise funds for Tearfund. Last weekend, on Saturday night, a number of young families who engage with the Church, invited a number of

their contemporaries, who have disengaged from the Church to a simple meal in Church grounds – 40 responded and completed a simple survey currently being analysed.

We have our faith, we have our people. We also have our building which has stood since 1866. I want to go back to the years before that, to around 1860. The community at that time made a decision – they decided to demolish the building they had worshipped in, in which loved ones had been baptised, married and buried and build a new one, better suited to the needs of the community. No one is suggesting demolishing St Mary's! The point I am making is that the community in 1860 saw the building as serving the community rather than the community serving the building. The community that has worshipped in the present church have made changes since 1866. The present layout of the Chancel area is not the same as in 1866 – it was changed in memory of a former Sexton. There is of course the installation of the glass screen to separate off the porch. Then there was the moving of the font to the front of the Church enabling the establishment of the side chapel.

So we have identified our problems and we have identified our resources. What I have been trying to do is to initiate a conversation within the Parish as to how we move into the future.

I have spoken of our ongoing decline in numbers at our services. The Select Vestry have, in the light of this continuing decline of numbers, come to the conclusion that the maintenance of two separate, essentially identical, services on a Sunday morning will soon cease to be viable. It has decided that the summer schedule of one service at 10:30 will continue past the end of August until December, when the situation will be reviewed. St Ann's in Dawson Street had a similar schedule of two main services in the morning when I was in training but long ago decided that that was no longer sustainable. I have been holding the Family Service in the Parish Centre. I appreciate that there have been some misgivings, but it has been a monthly reminder of how nice it was sitting closer together and it has, by far, been our best attended service. In the autumn that service will return to the Church but the distinctive character and musical style of that service that has evolved in recent times will be maintained in full. The single service actually gives us the flexibility to respond to what may be the very varying worship needs of not only those who have disengaged from Church but who still wish to maintain engagement and also the new, and very possibly different, population that is settling on our doorstep.

The Select Vestry will also be giving consideration to possible changes in the layout of the front of the Church which would enable a degree of flexibility in the use of the Church for different styles of worship as well as for musical events.

150 years ago, the Church of Ireland faced a fundamental challenge in the Disestablishment of our Church, involving loss of wealth, loss of privilege. We were allowed to keep our Churches but had to buy back our Rectories. Many feared that it spelled the end of our Church. There is a table in the See House that came out of Gladstone's house in London bearing the inscription, 'Around this table Gladstone and his associates plotted the destruction of the Church of Ireland.' Our Church responded in faith. There was a huge collection of funds that insured the financial viability of the Church and we adopted a constitution embodying for its time revolutionary levels of lay involvement in the governance of the Church.

We are at a crucial stage in the history of the Parish of Howth. We face into the future with either faith or fear. There are younger families coming through who will ensure the future of this Parish. That future will be different because the world into which we are moving will be very different and the Church, if it is to be faithful to the mission to go into all the world, must speak to that world.