

Whenever I walk the cliff path around the Red Rocks I find myself looking across Dublin Bay down towards Bray head. As a youngster I spent many happy holidays in Bray, looking across at the Hill of Howth. Those were good times, full of fond memories. Then, back in the 1980's, when we were living in Mountmellick, I announced to the boys that I was going to take them to see Bray; to show them the places where I had played as a child, climbed over rocks and all the other things you do on holidays.

When we arrived I recall a horrible sense of anticlimax. It was Bray alright – but it was n't the Bray I remembered – but then I was 18 inches shorter and of course in the excitement of a holiday kids don't notice things that adults notice. The boys thought Bray was great but I went home slightly disappointed – half wishing I had n't come so I could hang onto my old childhood memories.

But of course life is n't like that. Much as we may try to hang on to the past, life moves on.

It is this idea of moving on, letting go of past memories and experiences that came to mind as I read over the lessons for today, especially the lesson from the Acts of the Apostles.. This Sunday, falling as it does between the Feast of the Ascension and the Feast of Pentecost, is about a period of transition. In the New Testament narratives, Ascension marks the end of a close personal link with the Jesus they remembered. Pentecost marks a beginning of a new relationship in and through the Holy Spirit between God and his Church, the Body of Christ. In our reading from Acts we find disciples looking up. They are challenged 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?'

This set me thinking about two other Gospel stories; stories of disciples, of followers of Jesus trying to hang to past experiences. I think first of the scene on the Mount of Transfiguration. Peter, moved by the vision of Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah about what lay ahead, offers to build three shelters – trying to hold on to that particular moment, that particular experience. No, while the mountain top is a wonderful, inspiring experience, they must come down from the mountain to follow the path of obedience that Moses and Elijah had spoken of..

Then there are the accounts of that first Easter morning. Before first light, the women have gone to the tomb, memories of Friday still raw, to pay their respects at the grave of their friend. Luke tells us of angels saying, ‘He is not here, he is risen he has gone before you into Galilee.

All these accounts, of Transfiguration, of Resurrection, of Ascension, speak of moving on, going forward. John, in his account of the Last Supper, tells us of Jesus speaking of the Holy Spirit as one who would lead the disciples into all truth. The Risen Jesus going ahead, the Spirit leading; in all this I am reminded that the Gospel, far from being static has an inherent forward momentum.

My own Christian life, my own understanding of the world, of God, of my place in the world is in itself a process of deepening understanding, a journey towards God. In this regard, I often find myself thinking of a little episode in that crazy book ‘Puckoon’ by that comic genius, the late Spike Milligan. In it the central character, Milligan, is rejoicing in a glorious day. Milligan is

happy, supremely happy. Then he thinks, ‘Could this be the happiest day of my life?’ – and the very thought makes him miserable. I would see that as a sort of illustration of my own journey towards God. I feel I know God now – but I would be awfully disappointed if, in ten years time, I did not know him more deeply.

If our understanding of God is developing and growing, then by the same token so should our understanding of life. If you think about it we have seen major changes in society that none of us would want to see reversed. None of us (or I would hope none of us) would feel comfortable singing that verse that was included in the first version of Mrs Alexander’s hymn, ‘All things bright and beautiful’ that ran:

‘The rich man in his castle,
the poor man at his gate,
God gave to each their station
and ordered their estate.’

In the 18th and early 19th century slavery was considered quite acceptable – in this period the Church of England owned plantations in the West Indies that were worked by slaves. Racial and religious prejudice went unquestioned. Women were excluded from the professions, from voting. Christians resisted insights from science that were denounced as godless. So Galileo was threatened with torture to prevent him publishing his heretical theory that the earth went round the sun rather than the sun went round the earth. There are elements within the Church that have yet to come to terms with the theory of evolution.

In our own day and within our own Church, in the wake of the crisis surrounding the Drumcree standoff, the Church of Ireland commissioned an in depth survey of social attitudes with the Church both in the North and in the South, which culminated in the Hard Gospel Report. The resulting ‘Hard Gospel Report’ challenged the Church as a whole to examine attitudes surrounding attitudes regarding sectarianism as well as racial and gender stereotypes which undermine our Christian witness in the Ireland of today.

Standing as we are between the Feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost, I come back to this idea of moving on, moving on in our faith, moving on in our attitudes. We are on a journey towards God. We don’t have the full picture, we don’t have all the answers. What we do have is the assurance is that the God who came to us in the person of his Son goes before us in the Spirit to lead us into all truth, into a deeper understanding of God, of myself, of my place in the world. So I find myself reflecting on poor Milligan in his sudden fear that this could be as good as it gets and taking comfort in Paul’s words to his beloved Philippians that form the basis of much of my own personal philosophy in this regard.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus. (*Phil 3:12-14*)