

St Colmanell's Church in Ahoghill where I spent 16 years of my ministry had a very significant memorial tablet on the South Wall of the Church – it was to the late Captain Terence O'Neill, one time Prime Minister of northern Ireland, a man who sought to challenge Northern society to change before it slipped into the Troubles that were to last nigh on 35 years. On the Sunday before a crucial election he brought his whole Cabinet to worship with him in St Colmanell's, the visitors book for that day was a veritable who's who of Northern Ireland politics of that era.

Sadly his warnings were ignored and he was driven from office. In his last television address to the people of Northern Ireland as Prime Minister Terence O'Neill observed that Northern Ireland had proportionally the largest church going population in Western Europe. He went on to say 'Our religion could have enhanced our politics; instead we have allowed our politics to demean our religion.'

Over the last few weeks we have been reflecting on those words of Micah.

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? *Micah 6:8*

Over the last couple of weeks we have been thinking of those on the margins, how Christ in his own ministry identified with those on the margins of his own society. Last week our thoughts developed along the lines of a call to compassion, a word derived from the Greek for 'to suffer alongside'. Compassion is more than sympathy, compassion is about engaging with those in need. Compassion is not just about changing the situation of those in need, it is about changing us, our attitudes and priorities.

To pick up on what Terence O'Neill was saying to the Northern Ireland society all those years ago, our compassion is going to have to show itself in our actions and in the case of society at large, how society orders its life, its politics.

As Desmond Tutu once observed in the course of the anti-apartheid struggle, when criticised for his stand on issues of justice in South African society; 'Christians shouldn't be just pulling people out of the river. We should be going upstream to find out who is pushing them in.'

The Old Testament prophets saw a very strong link between the faith and the actions of the society of their day. Isaiah felt called to declare in God's name:

Isa 1:15 When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.

Isa 1:16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,

Isa 1:17 learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow. *Isaiah 1:15-17*

It is this sort of philosophy, that saw the yawning gap between the Christian profession of so many of their contemporaries and the appalling social conditions in 19th century society, that motivated the great social reformers of that era; that drove the likes of Wilberforce to devote so much of his life and energy in the pursuit of the abolition of slavery in the face of fierce opposition. That same conviction motivated so many of all races to campaign against

Apartheid in South Africa and for Civil Rights in the Southern States of the USA.

But of course, as Terence O'Neill was to observe in Northern Ireland, as has happened in all generations, it is all too easy to allow what we see as the 'real world' to dull our Christian conviction, to dismiss it as idealism that will not work in this so called 'real world' so that rather than 'allowing our religion to enrich our politics, we allow our politics to demean our religion.'