

¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth *John 16:31*

When we were first married we used to decorate our various flats with posters. One that always appealed to me was a picture of a rag doll being put through an old-fashioned mangle. The caption was a quotation from a 19th century American President, James Garfield, ‘ The truth will set you free – but first it will make you miserable’

Today, the Feast of Pentecost, we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Church. The passage from the Acts of the Apostles paints a vivid picture – we are possibly a little uncomfortable with the images of tongues of fire, of rushing wind. The picture of the crowd, drawn from all parts of the Eastern Mediterranean, each hearing the Good News in their own tongue, suggests a picture of a reversal of the scattering of the nations at the Tower of Babel, prefigures the spread of the Gospel beyond the narrow confines of Palestine.

Some elements of the Church can get so focussed on some of the more spectacular manifestation of the Spirit that we lose sight of the purpose of the Spirit. The purpose of the Spirit is brought out in our Gospel reading, part of John’s account of the teaching of Jesus in the Upper Room on the night before he died. One of the purposes of the Spirit is to reveal truth, to bring falsehood to light. Truth, truth about the world, truth about ourselves is sometimes an uncomfortable commodity.

Last week we were thinking about openness to God, openness to one another – there is the matter of an openness to ourselves, facing the truth about ourselves. These three are not unrelated. In the wake of the cross, in the days following the resurrection, we are told of several meetings of the risen Jesus with his disciples. For me one of the most powerful narratives is of Jesus’ three fold questioning of Peter that evokes parallel thoughts of Peter’s three fold denial; ‘Simon, son of John – do you love me?’ ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ ‘Simon, son of John, do you really love me?’ I have a picture here of Peter

confronting his past, confronting his past failure. Maybe that openness to himself, to the truth about his past, led to an openness to the Spirit, and all that God wanted to impart through the Spirit in the events that lay behind the accounts we have in Acts of Pentecost. There was something of this in the South African Truth and Reconciliation process. Forgiveness, repentance, reconciliation require truth. Truth, once faced, gives substance to forgiveness, to reconciliation. The truth does indeed have the capacity to set us free, even if it does involve pain in the process.

A few years ago, in the wake of the events surrounding the Drumcree standoff, the civil unrest and sectarian attacks, the Church of Ireland resolved to take a long hard look at itself, to ask ourselves some searching questions. Were there elements of sectarianism in our formularies, in our public statements and actions, be they at Parish, Community or national level? The present Archbishop of Armagh, Alan Harper (at that time Rector of St John's, Malone) presented a wide ranging report to the General Synod. One of the recommendations of that report, which was adopted, was that the Church commission an in depth study. Every Rector in the Parish was asked to complete and detailed questionnaire and a number of Parishes, including Ahoghill, were studied in greater detail. The outcome of this whole process was the Hard Gospel Report and the programme that followed. This encouraged our Church to identify and tackle issues of sectarianism, racism and other prejudices. One of the outcomes for our own Diocese was the Diocesan Chaplaincy to the Overseas Community. Archbishop Eames spoke at the time of the Church of Ireland being the first Church in these islands to hold a mirror up to itself. Some of the issues raised in this whole process were uncomfortable. But truth identified and dealt with can be truly healing, truly liberating.

Over the last ten days, in the wake of the Ryan Report, Irish Society has had to face an uncomfortable truth about itself. We have heard stories that were kept under wraps, pain suppressed for a lifetime. Finally, victims have been able to speak the truth in the knowledge that they will be heard, that they will be believed. President McAleese has

used the office of president to make some very perceptive comments. She said that she heard of some people saying the Ryan Report will bring closure on this whole sorry period in our history. It cannot bring closure, she argued, rather it must open up a profound debate concerning the nature of Irish society. What happened was deeply and profoundly wrong. The letters pages in the papers, our television and radio programmes have expressed emotions across the whole spectrum of anger, confusion, sorrow, despair. There has also been a release – individuals have spoken to me over this period of memories of times in our own boarding schools – now nothing even approaching the same scale – but memories of harshness on the part of those entrusted with their care that have left their own mark.

The truth has been uncomfortable, has been profoundly painful – but truth, even painful and unwelcome truth, has the power to heal and to liberate. The truth will make you free – even if, at first, it does make you miserable. But healing of the past must also carry on into the future. So it is not enough to look back and wring our hands, we must make sure that this never happens again. To make sure it never happens again we must, in the words of Archbishop Eames, hold a mirror up to ourselves and take note of what we see in the present. Interspersed among the comments on the radio news programmes were reminders that we as a society place very young offenders in the totally inappropriate environment of St Patrick's Institution. A high proportion of inmates in our prisons suffer from serious psychiatric conditions – a totally unsuitable environment in which to offer the care they require. Which all begs the question – are we all too often using our custodial facilities as dumping ground for disturbed individuals? Untreated, they are far more likely to reoffend on release resulting in further suffering for them and for the victims of their offences.

As the President has said, the publication of this report must open up a profound debate on the whole nature of Irish society. Jesus told his disciples, 'When the Spirit of Truth comes he will guide you into all the truth.' May we as individuals and as a society be open to the

truth that God seeks to impart; open to the truth, may we responsive to the truth so that in the words of the 1916 Declaration:

‘The republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally.’