

In his final address as Prime Minister to the people of Northern Ireland, as the Province began to slide into the turmoil that was to last over thirty years, the late Terence O'Neill made the following observation: 'Our religion could have enriched our politics; instead we have allowed our politics to demean our religion.' He was talking about a tension that was far from unique to Northern Ireland, that in truth has manifested itself in maybe subtler ways in the whole of Ireland and societies right across the world, the tension between the life of faith and life in the world.

We have seen it in our Gospel reading set for today as Jesus asks the disciples what they were discussing as they walked along. Set in the wider context of Jesus' teaching on self giving and his own coming rejection and death, they confess they had been talking of their relative status. These men who were following Jesus were ordinary fallible human beings. Like ourselves they were products of the society into which they had been born and in which they grew up; their attitudes, their way of thinking moulded by that environment. It was very much a hierarchical society. In hierarchies it is important to establish where you stand. When we move into new situations it is natural to carry over the attitudes and priorities with which we are familiar. And so as they settle in to this new kind of living to which Jesus has called them, they bring some of the baggage of their old way of life – who is on the top of the heap, who is on the bottom.

A large part of discipleship was that of learning a new, different set of values. There is an ongoing tension that has run right through history as to which set of values, the values of faith or the values of the world, which is going to predominate. That realisation is what lay at the heart of what Terence O'Neill said back before the Troubles as he challenged people to examine where the balance lay at that particular point in the history of Northern Ireland. 'Our religion could have enriched our politics; instead we have allowed our politics to demean our religion.'

This morning, at the 11:00 service, we are celebrating the great Gospel Sacrament of Baptism. At the heart of this sacrament lies an understanding of membership expressed in terms of the Body of Christ along with fundamental questions about values. What are the values we are going to teach this child; what are the values that motivate our own lives as individuals, as families, as a community as we undertake our own journey through life?

One of the core convictions of the Christian faith is expressed in the idea of Incarnation, that in the person of Jesus man encounters God. As Bishop David Jenkins once said, ‘Jesus is the face of God towards us’. But not only that, in the Incarnation, God experiences what it is to be human. So Paul, in writing to the Philippians will talk of God in Christ ‘emptying himself, taking the form of a servant....humbling himself.’ In turn Augustine speaks of God ‘becoming like us so that we might become like him.’

As members of the Body of Christ, making our own response of faith to the God we meet in the life and ministry of Jesus, we are called to become like him, signs of the presence of God in the world in which we live and work, in all the ambiguities in which we find ourselves. As we seek to live the life of faith in this flawed and imperfect world in which we find ourselves I know many of you face choices in your place of work, maybe none of which you feel totally comfortable with. Maybe all we can offer is our Christian integrity as we seek the best, the most honourable way forward.

In a world of increasing individualism, in which the bonds of community and even family are under increasing stress, it is important to remind ourselves that we do this, not as isolated individuals, but as members of a community that meets together, worships together and cares for one another. And so there is not just the witness of the individual, there is the witness of the community. We are the Body of Christ in this place; or, as I once heard said at a Diocesan Retreat, ‘a community of friends drawn together by the friendship of Jesus’. In our common life of worship, of service, of mutual care and friendship we are called to demonstrate to the world a different way of living in the world.

I would often say that a Baptism is a good time to reflect on our own individual lives before God as we hear the Baptismal promises made on behalf of the child being baptised. There is another undertaking in the Service of Baptism made not by the parents and godparents but by the Church community. After the parents and godparents have given their undertakings on behalf of the child, the following question is put to the congregation:

‘You have heard these our brothers and sisters respond to Christ.

Will you support them in this calling?’

The congregation answers; ‘We will support them.’

The Service then continues with the ‘Signing of the Cross’ as the priest says

Christ claims you for his own.

Receive the sign of the cross.

Live as a disciple of Christ,

fight the good fight,

finish the race, keep the faith.

How do we as a community support not only the children being baptised, not only their parents and godparents? How do we support one another as we seek to live as disciples of Christ, as we try to fight the good fight; as at times we struggle to finish the race, keep the faith?

We are now moving into the next stage of the Church 21 process that we started with the meetings over the course of Lent. At this stage in the process we are asking ourselves two questions. First, ‘What things are we doing well?’ There is a great deal that is positive that we want to affirm. Secondly ‘Are there things we are doing that we would like to do better?’ To do this it would be good to get a ‘snap shot’ of where we are, who we are as a community. So over the next couple of weeks we are placing a board in the porch that will have on it a Time Line. We would invite you to place upon that maybe pictures,

drawings, a few comments of events that you consider important in your own life, the life of the Parish, of Howth, or wider. There will be another board on which I am placing two simple questions ‘What does God mean to me?’ and ‘What does the Church mean to me?’ We are just looking for simple comments that need not be signed. The idea is that before we embark upon any journey we reflect on who we are as a community before God. so that we may move forward together as the Body of Christ in this place that we may be living and effectual signs of God’s presence in this place and time in which God has placed us.