

All through this week our newspapers and news bulletins have been filled with details of the deal that seems to be emerging with the IMF and the European Central Bank and its ramifications on the political and economic life of our country. We have had the publication of the 4 year plan, the meeting of the Fianna Fail party, the results of the bye-election in Donegal and the voting trends indicates that, if repeated in the General Election now certain to take place in the New year, the Fianna Fail Parliamentary party will be greatly reduced. All through we have heard the question, ‘Is that what Irish Sovereignty has come to?’ ‘What would the founding fathers of this country have to say?’ There is a stark contrast between the ideals of an earlier age and the grim reality of the present time. It is a similar contrast between the reality and the ideal that is presented to us in our Old Testament lesson as the prophet reflects on the place of the city of Jerusalem.

In the context of contemporary international politics, mention of the city of Jerusalem immediately calls to mind one of the most intractable problems facing modern diplomacy. It is one of the most significant holy places for three world faiths, Judaism, Islam and our own Christianity. Different religious groups have assigned to it huge theological significance. For Judaism it is, and from the time of David always has been, the place where God chose to make his name known, the city of God. Even in the exile, when Jerusalem and the Temple lay in ruins, the city held a central place in the Jewish thought and spirituality. To this day it is the hope of every observant Jew to visit Jerusalem. I recall when I was in college some of our lectures were attended by a retired microbiologist from the old Richmond Hospital. One time coming up to Passover he spoke of the arrangements he was making to observe Passover at the home of friends. Then he said, with some emotion in his voice, ‘One year, I will celebrate it in Jerusalem.’ For Orthodox Jews the very thought of sharing authority over the city with any other group would be nothing short of national apostasy. For Palestinians, whose ancestors have lived, worshipped, traded in the city for centuries, not to have a share in the ownership of Jerusalem would be unthinkable.

And in the Bible Jerusalem evokes a whole range of emotions and responses. There is Jesus' lament over the city:

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁸ See, your house is left to you, desolate. ³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.' " *Matt 23:37-39*

In both Old and New Testament it is seen as a city of great potential and also great failure. There is a tension between what it is and what it is called to be. In the time of Isaiah Jerusalem was in a marginal and vulnerable position caught between the great powers of Egypt and Assyria and later Babylon, soon to be conquered and destroyed. Against that background the prophet imagines a majestic future for the city in which all nations, even mighty Egypt and Assyria, will stream to her. The prophet speaks of God at the heart of the restored city; Jerusalem will stand as a vehicle of justice and peace.

What we have here in the contrast between the picture painted by Jesus and the vision of Isaiah for the city represents the tension between Jerusalem as it was and what it was intended to be.

In a very real sense the story of Jerusalem is our story writ large. On occasion that I administer the sacrament of Baptism, as I lead the parents and godparents in the promises they make on behalf of their child, I invite you the congregation to reflect on those same promises in your own hearts. I for one am only too aware at times of the gap between those promises and where I am at in my spiritual life. As I reflect on these with the parents and godparents I always make the point that these are not questions of people who have arrived but questions of people who are on a journey. I can say with integrity that I renounce the devil and all his works and still acknowledge in my heart that evil still has its influence. I can say with integrity that I submit to Christ, still knowing there is work to do in that area as well. Paul in his letter to the Philippians faces this one with great candour:

¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹² 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. *Phil 4:10-12*

Elsewhere we come across the expression:

we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, *Eph 4:15*

Reflecting upon Baptism and the vocation of Baptism, Archbishop McAdoo often used the phrase, ‘becoming what we are’. I have always found that a very insightful expression because it takes that tension between what I am and what I am called to be seriously. Christ has made me his own – the rest of my life is discovering what that means in my own life. Life is not static, faith is not static – if it were we would stagnate. No life is a journey, faith is a journey, a journey into Christ: a journey undertaken in fellowship with Christ.

Every journey has its staging posts, places to stop and rest, places to review the journey so far, to check we are still on course. In the Church’s year the two great Festivals of Christmas and Easter are preceded by the two penitential seasons of Advent and Lent. These are seasons to reflect, to look back over the journey so far, and to prepare that we might better celebrate the feasts of the incarnation and our redemption. These last few weeks have been something of a penitential time for our society as we have been presented with the realities of our situation, what brought us to this point, and the steps that we will have to take to re-establish our sovereignty.

We are now preparing to celebrate the festival of Christmas. In the Sunday School Nativity and in the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols in word and music and drama we reflect on the meaning of coming of Christ. Last year the Sunday School led us in a reflection on the Old Testament story leading up to the birth of Jesus. Next Sunday they will be leading us in a reflection on who the Christ child was destined to be. Both the

Nativity and the Carol Service encourage us to look beyond the tinsel, look beyond the scene around the manger and reflect on who this child is; who he was destined to be and what sort of community we, the Church, the Body of Christ, are called to be in the world of today as we seek to follow him and bear witness to him; as we seek to live up to what we have pledged to be in our Baptism, servants of the Crucified and Risen Christ, that we may, in the words of Archbishop McAdoo, ‘become what we are’, the Body of Christ in the world of today.