

Do you ever find yourself asking, ‘Would n’t it be nice if ...?’ You can do this on a number of levels. The child can dream ‘Would n’t it be nice if ... you did n’t have to go to school you could eat what you liked for dinner you could go to bed when you liked?’ Of course it is not just the children who do this. Maybe around the house the question is asked ‘Would n’t it be nice if there was a flower bed in the middle of the lawn?’ I often remark that these questions may take only a minute to ask but a lot longer to put into effect.

That question ‘Would n’t it be nice if ... ?’ can just remain at the level of the day dream. We can sit looking at the lawn and imagine the flower bed, the rockery, the roses. We can imagine the scent of the flowers, the buzzing of the bees. They remain at the level of the day dream because we are not willing to take the practical steps, to put in the effort required, to transform our day dreams into reality.

Of course there are more far reaching questions of this nature. Years ago, as traffic planners looked at the mounting problems as a larger and larger number of bigger and bigger trucks clogged up the traffic in the city of Dublin, at some point someone will have said something along the lines of ‘Would n’t it be nice if we had a tunnel that took all those trucks out of the port out onto the M50?’ A whole project was born. Plans were drawn up, calculations made and eventually the tunnel built as a ‘Would n’t it be nice if ...’ has been transformed into a reality.

The road to peace in Northern Ireland has been a long and arduous one with many hiccups along the way. I remember, in the wake of the first Loyalist and Republican cease-fires, the Northern Ireland Office sponsored a series of TV advertisements designed to promote a culture of peace in a society that had come to see conflict as the norm. One of them showed a group of children from different backgrounds playing together and finished with the question, ‘Would n’t it be great if it could be like this all of the time?’ At one level there was a naivety to that campaign – society is not made up of three year olds playing around a bouncy castle – but it did put out a challenge. It challenged the assumption that

conflict was the norm, that there was no alternative. All the political manoeuvring, the advances and the failures, of the last fifteen years have been drawing Northern Ireland towards that dream. There are still those on both sides who are more comfortable with conflict, who still feel threatened by that dream – reminders that there are still attitudes that have to be changed if the dream ‘Would n’t it be nice if ... ?’ is finally to take root.

The lessons today present us with another of these ‘Would n’t it be nice if ... ?’ situations. Our Old Testament Lesson is one of those lovely passages from Isaiah, in which the prophet points to a future when the creation will be in harmony with its creator: when

The wolf will live with the lamb,
.....
The infant will play near the hole of the cobra,
.....
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain, *Is 11:6ff*

This, we are told, will be brought to pass with the coming of God’s Messiah, one who will bring God’s wisdom and justice to bear on human society. Under his rule the disorder and conflict of the created world will be a thing of the past. What are the basic requirements for this to come to pass? It will be when:

the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea. *Is 11:9*

This for me provides the basic link between the dream, ‘Would n’t it be nice if the world was in harmony with its creator?’ and it coming into reality.

Our Gospel reading enlarges on this link between dream and reality. It tells of the ministry of John the Baptist. St Matthew identifies the ministry of John with the one spoke of in the Book of Isaiah crying out, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’

John’s message was a warning against complacency. ‘⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”’. Each generation has to make its own

profession of faith, make its own commitment to God. John is his own work of preparing the way warned against such complacency and called the people of his day to repentance.

What are we talking about when we use that word ‘repentance’? If we go to our doctor with a problem she may offer a particular course of treatment. But at the same time we will often be told that if the treatment is to be effective then we are also going to have to make changes in life-style. There is no point, for example in my doctor treating me for diabetes if I am not prepared to alter my diet. She is looking for a sort of repentance – a recognition of the need to change and, with that, a willingness to do something about it.

Repentance involves recognising that there are things in our life that are wrong, that need to be cleared away. Attitudes, maybe dressed in respectable clothes, which are contrary to God’s will – prejudices, habits, resentments, bigotries that are blocking the way of Christ into our hearts. John warned the Pharisees and Saducees who came to him for baptism that the repentance that God demanded has to produce fruit in changed lives.

Our doctor may well warn us that if we are not prepared to make the changes she is looking for then we will have to accept the consequences. It is a sort of warning of judgement. The IMF and the European Central Bank have made a similar demand upon us as a nation. Fundamental changes will have to be made in our economy if we are to emerge from our present crisis. It is if you like, a call to repentance, a warning of judgement.

A crisis such as this is presenting a wider challenge, a wider opportunity to us as a society – to re-evaluate wider issues and priorities in our society, values that can not be measured on a balance sheet, that never appear on a profit and loss account that none the less define us as a society. I am thinking of the values we put on community, on integrity in business, in politics; the priority we give to justice, the place of the weak and the marginalised in our society – all these will determine how we steer our society through the next few years into the future and the nature of the society that will emerge from that process. We will be

facing an election in the next three or four months. This will be one of the most crucial elections in the history of this State, because the next Dail, the persons we elect, will shape the future of this country and the nature of the society our children and grandchildren will inherit.

‘Would n’t it be nice if?’ Will we as a society have the courage, the integrity to make the day dream a reality?