

Back in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Mountmellick (where I was Rector during the 1980's) was a prosperous industrial town. It was described as the Manchester of Ireland. It is said that in its heyday it produced everything from a needle to an anchor. Apparently Queen Victoria wore items of Mountmellick lace at her coronation. Then the railways came to Ireland. The railway companies obviously wanted to go through Mountmellick. Several prominent Quaker families, who had been responsible for the town's prosperity, decided that the railway was a passing fad and it would disrupt the life of the town. They would have none of these innovations. The railway instead went to the neighbouring town of Maryborough, which is now Portlaoise. One by one the factories that had produced Mountmellick's prosperity closed down leaving it simply as a shopping town for local farmers and a dormitory town for Portlaoise.

Mountmellick was not prepared to adapt to the changes that the railways brought and the world simply passed it by. Our portion for the Epistle speaks of radical change that some in the infant Church were finding it very hard to come to terms with.

When Peter was staying in Joppa at the home of his friend Simon, he had a vision of a sheet being lowered before him containing all kinds of animals that Peter as a Jew would have regarded as unclean. He was told in the dream to take one, kill it and eat it. Peter refused, for like all practising Jews he would have been meticulous in avoiding eating any animal the scriptures described as unclean. He is rebuked and told to go ahead – it is not for him to call impure anything that God has made clean.

The meaning of this vision becomes clear to him when he receives an invitation to visit a Roman soldier named Cornelius who lived in Caesarea. So what is remarkable about that? Again, Peter as a Jew would have been, until then, wary of any sort of fellowship with non-Jews. In that passage in Acts, the vision, combined with the invitation to visit Cornelius, seemed to Peter to be God telling him that he wanted the Gospel to move outside the confines of Judaism. Peter understands that this represented a major shift in his understanding of God's dealings with mankind. As he was to say in Cornelius' house, 'I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.'

So he went to the house of Cornelius, shares in their fellowship and, as we read in our reading from Acts, tells them of the Gospel. Not only that, he baptises them and welcomes them into the fellowship of the Church. We need to remind ourselves that what Peter was doing on that occasion represented revolutionary change in the life of the Church. And so when later on the news of these events reached the Church at Jerusalem, Peter was summoned to explain what he had done. There were many in the Church at Jerusalem who felt he had no business going outside the Jewish community – this was unacceptable change and they wanted it stopped before it went any further.

At this point the Church had to make a fundamental decision – was the Gospel just for the Jewish people or was it for all. If it was for all, then how were they to share it? Should people for example be converted to Judaism as part and parcel of their Christian conversion? They had to sort out what was Gospel and what was cultural. That is a question for the Church in every generation as it has moved into new territory and into new cultures. In the end it was accepted that Gentile converts should not be subjected to ceremonial law (e.g. circumcision) but they should avoid food that had been sacrificed to idols. Once this change was accepted the way was clear for Paul's later mission to the Gentiles and the spread of Christianity across Europe.

We have now entered the season of Epiphany. This is traditionally a time of reflection on the mission of the Church, when, as we think of the opening stages of our Lord's ministry, we realise that this is a Gospel for all men, of all cultures, of all times. How do we present the same Gospel to people of different cultures at different stages in history? Initially, when the Church moved out of Europe some 400 years ago, in the wake of the colonial explorers, into America, Asia and Africa, it sought to produce Christians in their own image. On conversion to Christianity, members of the native peoples were dressed in European clothes, given European names and encouraged to worship using hymns that had been written for the Western Church in buildings that were duplicates of those found in Europe. Over the last century, these former colonial churches have gained a new vitality as aspects of African and Asian culture have been used to express fundamental Christian truths. Rachel and I were particularly impressed when we went to morning worship in St George's Cathedral in Capetown the three languages of that region of South Africa, English, Afrikaans and Xhosa were blended into a single act of worship. Another example that has always struck me comes from the members of the Masai tribe in Kenya. They

have a traditional way of expressing fellowship that consists simply in exchanging a piece of grass. When they come to celebrate Communion a piece of grass is passed around the congregation and then brought up to the front along with the offertory. If there is a conflict between two members of the congregation the grass is not passed until the conflict is resolved. If it cannot be sorted out that day, the grass does not come up to the front and the communion is not celebrated that day because the fellowship is broken.

What is important in all of this is that the Church adapts its presentation to meet the needs of those to whom it is speaking but stays true to the content, the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Later today, at our 11:00 service we will be joined by members of 3Rock, the Dublin Diocesan Youth Organisation. They will be speaking of the work of 3Rock and ways in which they are seeking to help young people, who are often disaffected with the faith, to explore issues of faith and so enable them to take their own distinctive place within the life of the Church at large.

The purpose of the Church is not to perpetuate itself but in its common life and witness to proclaim the Gospel of Christ. Peter felt that God was reminding him that the Gospel is not for a particular group, not confined to a particular culture but is for all. The Church responded by moving out from the familiar confines of Judaism, out into the world, proclaiming the Gospel in words and terms that the world could understand. May we always remember that the Gospel is not just for us, for our comfort and edification. It is also for a world that needs to hear, whether it be different cultures in a foreign land or different cultures within our own land. May our witness be ever faithful to the fundamentals of the Gospel and at the same time sensitive to the needs and those to whom we speak.

I began by talking of Mountmellick, a community that misread the significance of the coming of the railways and so lost its place, lost its way in the commercial life of this country. In its history, the Church has often reacted too late to changes in the wider world, being seen as reacting against changes in scientific understanding, the role of women in society. The Church in every generation and culture must be ever willing to explore how unchanging truths can be heard afresh by those to whom we are called to speak.