

Almighty and merciful God, who in days of old didst give to this land the benediction of thy holy Church; Withdraw not, we pray thee, thy favour from us, but so correct what is amiss, and supply what is lacking, that we may more and more bring forth fruit to thy glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. (*Prayer for Ireland - BCP 2004, p 145*)

There are a number of stories that come out of the concentration camps of the Second World War. Alongside stories of cruelty, there are stories of the power of the human spirit to survive even in the darkest of circumstances. I want to begin by reflecting on stories of music. The camps held some of the most talented individuals in European society, leaders of their field in science, theology, philosophy – and music. Many of the camps had their own orchestras. Some were organised by the camp authorities – to give a veneer of civilisation to the camps. Inmates were forced to play for the camp commanders, to entertain visitors and even as trainloads of fresh prisoners arrived at the camp.

But there were other orchestras organised by the prisoners themselves. They played not only established orchestral classics, but also pieces composed by themselves that spoke to and of the conditions in which they were forced to live. After the war a numbers of these pieces came to be performed in public. After one of these concerts, which included a particularly haunting piece of music, a member of the audience approached the conductor and pointed out that the combination of instruments he had written for was quite unusual. What, he asked, had made him use that particular combination of instruments. The composer replied that these were the only instruments available to him.

He had to make do with the instruments he had. That in itself is a story of human resilience. Instead of bewailing what he did not have, the composer made the very best of what he did have available to him and produced something that was quite stunning. It is a business of making something beautiful out of what is imperfect that is brought out in that Prayer for Ireland that I used at the beginning, and in particular:

so correct what is amiss, and supply what is lacking,

As I thought on that, the word that came to me was ‘grace’. That for me draws together the concepts of empowerment, of inspiration, of God working in and through my strengths, my weaknesses, my faithfulness and my failure.

It is with that in mind I turn to the portion appointed as the second lesson for this 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany, from Paul’s 1st Letter to the Corinthians. The Corinthian Church in many ways mirrors the Church in our own day. It was a very diverse community, different groups identifying very strongly with particular charismatic figures, Peter, Paul, Appolos. Different factions held very strong divergent views on the place and importance of different spiritual gifts. This diversity was manifesting itself in divisiveness. In this passage Paul appeals for a unity based on the recognition that God is working in and through all the varied gifts and talents of the Church.

As Paul talks of the nature and inspiration of the varied gifts and talents of this troubled and troubling Church he uses language that is very much rooted in this whole concept of grace.

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. *1 Cor 12:4-6*

Even his choice of words serves to emphasise his message. The piece we have translated as; ‘there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them’; In the original Greek in which he was writing, the words we have rendered as ‘activities’ and ‘activates’ have their root in the Greek word ἐνεργεῖν , from which we of course derive our words ‘energy’, ‘energise’. So, ‘there are varieties of energies, but it is the same God who energises all of them’. This calls to mind the teaching of the Revised Catechism of the Church of Ireland on the work of the Holy Spirit, ‘The Holy Spirit inspires all that is good in mankind.’ God, through the Spirit, energising, inspiring.

I go back to that prayer for Ireland in our Prayer Book:

Almighty and merciful God, who in days of old didst give to this land the benediction of thy holy Church; Withdraw not, we pray thee, thy favour from us, but so correct what is amiss, and supply what is lacking, that we may more and more bring forth fruit to thy glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. (*BCP 2004, p 145*)

This prayer for Ireland, this prayer for the Church, is a prayer that God may work in and through the imperfection of our life and witness, that God may energise our energies. The Ireland I arrived in as a young student in 1968 is a very different Ireland to the Ireland of today. The Church of today faces very different pressures to the Church in which I was ordained in 1978. Issues of human sexuality were hardly mentioned; Ireland was still in transition from a largely rural to urban society; our entry into the European Union, the arrival of people from all parts of the world to live and work among us has made our

society more varied and cosmopolitan. Our legislators and judiciary have had to engage with issues of human sexuality, issues surrounding the beginning and end of life, abortion and assisted suicide that had been avoided or swept under the carpet. The aftermath of the Celtic Tiger has presented our society with issues of justice, of fairness. As prosperity returns what sort of economy, what sort of society do we want to see evolving? As we look at soaring house prices and the seemingly intractable problem of homelessness, have we learned anything from the disaster that descended upon us ten years ago? Then further afield, elements of the Brexit debate, the rise of the far right in Europe, the suspicion of those who are different; these are all stoking tensions in society. What place does the Church have in a rapidly changing society? It is I would argue to be the Body of Christ in the world of today, to embody in its individual and corporate life something of the healing, reconciling, transforming presence of Christ in the world of today, to answer in our own lives the Prayer of St Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen

I began by speaking of haunting, inspiring music coming out of the darkness of the concentration camps; music produced by an orchestra, apparently lacking the instruments that were required, had a power to transcend the worst that man could do.

O Lord ‘so correct what is amiss, and supply what is lacking, that we may more and more bring forth fruit to thy glory;’